

Shared Intelligence



BY SHARED INTELLIGENCE

Research to inform a new library strategy for Dorset Council

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Executive summary

It has been over ten years since the last Dorset Council library strategy was developed. Communities in Dorset have seen huge change and transformation in this time. Local government within Dorset has been reorganised, with a new unitary council, Dorset Council, established in April 2019. Technology has changed how services are delivered and accessed. The pandemic has impacted the lives of communities, their health, employment and welfare.

Dorset Council is currently transforming its services to reflect changing needs and to ensure the delivery of modern and efficient services that best support its communities. For the library service, this presents a time to re-connect with communities and other services, internal and external, to understand the role of library services in continuing to meet the needs of communities.

In September 2021, Dorset Council commissioned [Shared Intelligence](#) to undertake research to inform a new library strategy. This research has investigated how the library service can have greater impact on the communities it serves, how it can support delivery of services who share priorities, and how services should continue to support communities over the next 10 years.

Findings

We heard that those in Dorset who engage with library services value access to books in all formats, but also other resources and human help, provided in trusted spaces. Of those who don't currently use library services, most are 'lapsed users' rather than having never used library services in their lives. We heard that many non-users value libraries as community infrastructure and the most common barrier they face to engaging with the service is lack of knowledge of what is on offer and how it could benefit them.

We saw evidence of a broad range of needs amongst Dorset's communities which vary across life stages (from early years, to adolescence, to entering the labour market and beyond). There is also great variation in people's circumstances across the county; while Dorset has areas of affluence, it also has pockets of significant deprivation.

What this means for the library service

The research revealed a huge number of opportunities for library services to have greater impact on communities within Dorset. More importantly, the research and engagement process revealed the willingness and appetite of council and community services to work more closely with the library service to achieve shared priorities and meet community needs now and in the future.

This report suggests four areas for action:

Communication: develop more effective communication of the full breadth of the library service offer to existing users and to those who do not currently use libraries (but who could benefit if they did). This requires particular skillsets, and a structured plan, but is essential to enable the service to reach a far larger proportion of those residents who stand to benefit from the library service offer, and in ways which help other local services meet and manage demand.

Customer support: prioritise user interactions which are relational and add value (events, activities, human help, support for community groups, advice, guidance) over those which are transactional (borrowing and returning items, making payments or bookings), and encourage more people to complete basic tasks digitally. This will enable staff to focus on activities with the greatest impact, and on users with the greatest needs. This also requires the right skillsets and a clear plan.

Collaboration: formalise relationships with other service partners through regular discussions with clear remits; many partners can easily identify countless opportunities for libraries to support, enhance, and reduce strain on their services. These need co-ordination, development, investment, and most important of all, well-reasoned prioritisation.

Clarity: this report identifies more opportunities for increasing impact than the service can realistically pursue. A process of prioritisation is essential. This requires the library service clearly to state its purpose and vision, how it contributes to Dorset-wide priorities, and what the service is uniquely placed to do. This detail will form part of a draft library strategy, which will be subject to public consultation. The feedback following public consultation will provide the framework for prioritisation i.e. to decide which opportunities best contribute to the agreed purpose and vision. By using the agreed strategy as a framework for prioritisation the service will be able to develop a prioritised plan of action which enables it to be a more impactful contributor to the lives of all of Dorset's communities.

1. Introduction

Dorset Council are in the process of developing a new library strategy for Dorset. The previous library strategy was developed over 10 years ago. Since then, there has been much wider societal change and transformation, and significant change within the council too.

The last 10 years have seen significant technological and digital transformation. This has had far reaching impacts from fulfilling day to day tasks and communicating with loved ones, to the way services are being delivered and accessed by service users. In April 2019, Dorset Council, a new unitary authority, was formed replacing five district councils and the county council following a period of local government reorganisation. At the time of embarking on the process to develop a new library strategy, the country has been through two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this time all services have needed to adapt their service delivery to provide immediate responses to Covid-19, ensuring communities are supported, safe and healthy. The library service itself has been at the forefront of this response. It has redeployed staff to provide support on the front line and has made many adaptations to its offer to ensure communities can still access services safely. This has included moving events and activities to online delivery, whereas previously the majority were delivered in person.

These wider transformations and changes have brought about many opportunities which services can build on in future service delivery. Dorset Council library service, as part of the wider council, are keen to harness these opportunities to deliver more efficient, joined up, and impactful services to its communities.

The development of a new library strategy sits within a context of wider corporate

transformation and a 'One Team' approach of corporate integration. The aim of this transformation is to develop a collaborative, efficient and modern council that is more effective at early intervention, that makes better use of assets, helps close digital and economic divides and manages service demand. It aims to do this by working more collaboratively with residents, communities, and partners across Dorset.

On a national level, Arts Council England's 10-year strategy, [Let's Create](#) (2020-2030), and the forthcoming [Strategic Plan](#) for Libraries Connected provides further context that will inform the development of Dorset's library service strategy.

The formation of the new unitary council in 2019 provides many more opportunities to work more collaboratively both across council services and out into the community. Figure 1 presents the key corporate priorities for Dorset Council which the library service is keen to contribute to through its own service delivery, and through partnerships.



Figure 1 - Dorset Council's Priorities (2020)

In addition to contributing to these wider council goals, the library service is keen to understand how it can have a greater connection with its communities, improve service outcomes and facilitate delivery of

shared outcomes with council and community partners. They also want to be forward thinking, considering how services and the library offer will need to evolve over time to support communities for the next 10 years.

THE RESEARCH & PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

[Shared Intelligence](#) were commissioned to support and undertake consultation and engagement work to inform the co-design of a new library strategy for Dorset. This research took place under the banner of Dorset's ['Let's Talk Libraries'](#) consultation. The objectives of this phase of work were to co-produce a vision and strategic aims for the library service which respond to what residents value about the current offer, to barriers the library service faces in reaching residents, to the needs of local communities and to the views of those who do not use the service.

Within this context, we developed three overarching research questions:

1. **How can public libraries contribute with more impact to residents' life stages, especially those with the greatest needs?**
2. **How can the library service become more aligned in delivering shared priorities?**
3. **Over the coming 10 years what wider societal factors will most influence the local needs which public libraries address?**

Our work has comprised:

- direct public engagement to engage with:
 - existing library users
 - non-users
 - areas of deprivation
 - children and families
 - Elected Members

- protected groups¹
- Dorset Council and library staff members
- convening a Dorset Council 'One Team' group of officers from the library service, other council and community services,
- conducting ethnographic interviews with individuals who do not use libraries.

We have also provided survey design and analysis advice on Dorset Council's large-scale 'Let's Talk Libraries' public survey of library users and non-users (which received over 7,000 responses).

In parallel Dorset library service convened a series of internal task and finish groups led by frontline staff. These identified opportunities to meet community needs more effectively based on frontline knowledge of users and communities. We have drawn on their findings for this report.

This report sets out the key findings from all these strands of research and engagement.

From the outset we viewed engagement with non-users as essential to understand the needs of those who stand to benefit most from library services. We estimate from data for the southwest region that library users make up around 27% of the 16+ population and around 38% of the 5–15-year-old population (from DCMS Taking Part data 2019/2020). In other words, around 70% of adults and 60% of children do not currently use library services, yet many have needs the service can meet. It was this need for insight that led us to use ethnographic interviews² to understand non-users (full report of the ethnographic interviews is Appendix C but published as a stand-alone document).

¹ Protected groups refers to the protected characteristics specified in the Equality Act 2010 and Dorset Council's additional protected characteristics.

² Ethnography is a type of research that gathers rich, detailed data from individuals in their

everyday environment. Researchers observe participant behaviours in person or virtually and ask questions to understand the participant's thoughts, feelings and experiences.

2. What parts of the library service are valued by current users of Dorset libraries?

Dorset's current offer is comprised of 23 council run libraries, eight community managed libraries, and online and home library services. These provide a unique combination of resources and human help. There are many different aspects of the current offer which are valued by Dorset's communities. It is the multiple potential uses - educational, social, well-being, combined with space and support - that the public value. Figure 2 is a word cloud representing common words library users mentioned when talking about what they valued from library services. More detail on what current users value most, based on our public engagement, and Dorset Council's public survey, is detailed in Appendix A. The full results of Dorset Council's survey are to be published separately.

The headline findings from public engagement are that what many current users value most is access to books, along with access to information and support, activities and events, digital resources, and space (to read, work and study).

What users value differs greatly depending on who they are and their stage of life, as shown in Figure 3 in which responses from Over 65s and Under 45s are shown separately. What many older users value most (in addition to book-borrowing) are online services related to borrowing, along with information and advice. What younger users value most (in addition to book-borrowing) are activities and events, access to computers and WiFi, and space for work and study.

All this contrasts with non-users (most of whom are better described as 'lapsed' users – see section 4) who value libraries as

community infrastructure, but are largely unaware of the current offer.

The following sections describe a number of themes in what current users say they value.



Figure 2: Word cloud of words used to describe Dorset libraries taken from interviews with early years families and user focus groups.

Book stock

Users value having access to a vast collection of books via the library service and this is a shared view across all users of all ages. However while the library service puts significant effort into acquiring inclusive book stock, some users wanted more books for teenagers, books in accessible formats, and more diversity in the range, for example black history and children's books representing disabilities.

Flexibility of Dorset's library service

The inherent flexibility of the library service means the public can use libraries in many ways to suit different purposes. This in itself is valued.

"Libraries are not just about resources; they represent a safe space for vulnerable members of the community or those that don't feel they belong in other spaces" – Equalities, Diversity, and Inclusion Workshop

Physical space

The public value Dorset libraries as safe and trusted physical spaces which can be accessed by anyone without obligation. Often people contrast libraries with cafes or venues connected to faith communities where they feel an expectation to make a purchase or participate.

Library spaces are also versatile; users can decide how they use the space or can take part in activities arranged by others who can also use the space for many purposes; community groups delivering help or support, council officers or Elected Members offering drop-in sessions.

Frequent users in the public engagement discussions were more familiar with the extent of the online offer, and valued it, but believed it was under-used and could be used by more people including those who have time constraints, or restricted mobility.

Information and resources

The survey responses indicate that access to information and advice is one of the most valued aspects of the service especially for older users.

In terms of Dorset's public service goals for all customers to be able to access council services through 'one front door', the public engagement showed users value the library as

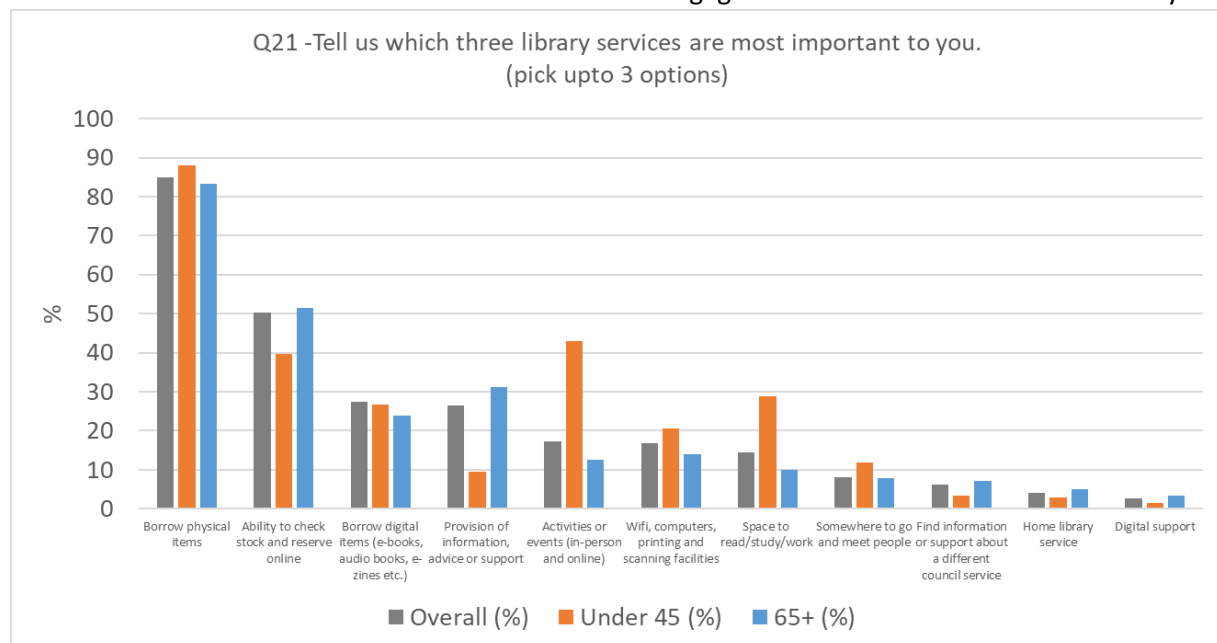


Figure 3 – library services most important to respondents for those under 45 and over 65 years old.

Online offer

In the public engagement the value of the online offer was mentioned less than physical services. This seems due to general lack of awareness of the online offer. However, when the online offer was raised, what people said they valued tended to be e-books, e-magazines, audiobooks, and e-newspapers.

For survey respondents the online offer was seen principally as an adjunct to the book-lending offer to enable remote browsing and renewals, especially for older users.

a prime example of that single front door. The council desk in Dorchester Library and Learning Centre was given as an example where people could access advice on a range of issues including housing, health, or employment.

Access to resources such as computers, photocopiers as well as Wi-Fi is highly valued by users especially younger users. We heard how access to this equipment was a lifeline for those who lack digital access at home. We also heard that those who had other means of

digital access to information still saw value in library-based provision, because it was in a neutral trusted space.

Events

Activities and events are the second most valued element of library services for younger library users. In the public engagement, users who value activities and events highlighted opportunities for social interaction and learning as key benefits. For users with disabilities events can offer opportunities to meet people, socialise, and improve mental health and wellbeing. For some users library events fill gaps by providing opportunities unavailable elsewhere, or being free, they remove cost barriers.

Library service staff

Staff were often mentioned in the public engagement as a valued aspect of the library service. Staff are felt to provide a face-to-face point of contact for those who require advice, information, and support beyond what can be provided digitally. As many other public, community, and commercial services shift to online-only, opportunities for face-to-face support become increasingly hard to find.

The importance of social interaction has been increasingly recognised over the course of the pandemic. In this context, while support in a functional sense is crucial, people also talked about the value of staff members in a social sense – to provide human connection and to have a casual conversation.

For library staff themselves the areas where they believed they added most value included helping younger people search for jobs using computers and helping residents access support they are eligible for. They also saw value in Rhyme Times for early years, craft sessions, author events, and reading groups; again these were thought to provide important opportunities to socialise and form social networks. Staff also showed awareness of the need for inclusive approaches

especially when delivered online. For example the need for subtitles and other adaptations.

We also heard from staff about the value of volunteering opportunities within the library service. These provide opportunities for residents to develop confidence and give back to their community. Digital Champions were seen as a particularly valuable form of volunteering, particularly in supporting digital inclusion and supporting residents to access digital services.

3. What needs have been identified within Dorset's communities and across other local services?

The public engagement, Dorset Council survey, One Team discussions and the staff-led task and finish groups identified many needs in Dorset where libraries can have a positive impact. There was a high level of consistency throughout the data collected about what these needs were, who they were associated with, and what may be required in order to address them. The detail of this analysis can be found in Appendix B.

WHAT RESIDENTS NEED

Needs were identified that were associated with different demographics including:

- age groups, for example early years who require resources for learning and development,
- genders, for example women and men who have different health needs,
- sexual orientation, for example there is evidence to suggest that LGBTQ+ are at a higher risk of experiencing harm than others, and
- ethnicities, for example we heard that there are some communities who were less able to access opportunities, such as training and leadership opportunities, than others.

Some needs were associated with groups in particular circumstances, such as members of the Armed Forces Community, who often face isolation due to regular relocation, or those rurally isolated in the county. Other needs were associated with access, such as digital exclusion, speaking English as a second

language, financial hardship, or people with personal support needs.

It was also clear from the data that needs change as people reach different life stages. This mirrors the message in the Libraries Taskforce [Ambition for Libraries](#) (2016-2021) report, which shows how library services offer a 'cradle-to-grave' service, aiming to support communities throughout their lives.

Parents often talked of the importance of education resources and safe spaces that allow children to explore and play.

Jobseekers often need digital access and connectivity to access job adverts and application processes. In a recent report for DCMS researchers found "*digital skills are becoming a near-universal requirement for employment*"³. Furthermore, a report by Reed identified that over the pandemic, access to digital devices and skills have become essential for job-seeking⁴.

Carers often find other areas of their lives affected by their caring responsibilities such as their education, work, and social life. They often need information and support to help them navigate these circumstances as well as a need for connection to social networks. We heard in the One Team discussions that around two thirds of adults with care needs are self-funded. Ensuring that self-funded adults with care needs remain connected is a significant area of need.

The fact that needs differ at different stages means there are times when people require

³ [No Longer Optional: Employer Demand for Digital Skills](#), Burning Glass for DCMS (2019).

⁴ [Supporting digital inclusion for jobseekers](#), Reed (2021).

more support or seek out support. In the context of library use, we often heard from individuals who accessed a library when they needed specific help, but there could also be long periods of time when they did not use libraries because they had no immediate need (or were unaware that the library service could help them).

“I used to use it all the time when the kids were little. There were times when I could just plonk them down in the book department... less so now, now they’ve grown up” – Focus group participant, Weymouth.

There is wide variation in people’s circumstances across Dorset. For example the Dorset Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (2021) shows that while Dorset is a nature-rich county, 43% of people in Dorset live more than 300 metres away from greenspace⁵. There are also areas of significant deprivation which can be seen most starkly in differences in life expectancy; an 11 year difference exists between life expectancy in Colehill & Wimborne Minster East (84.9 years) compared to Melcombe Regis (73.4 years).

WHAT SERVICES NEED

The needs of services relate to their ability to deliver their services, achieve intended impact, and support and develop their own organisations. There were three main categories of need amongst services:

Help to increase the reach of their services to ensure services identify and access those who need them or could benefit most from them. In public engagement in a low income locality, community organisations explained the challenges of reaching those in the community who they are trying to support.

“The most difficult thing for us is reaching the people who need to come and get support.” – Community organisation, focus group in Weymouth.

Given their reach, accessibility and geographic spread, Dorset libraries can act as focal points for other services to reach more of those who require help.

Support with communication to increase public awareness of available support and to accelerate service-to-service collaboration around shared priorities. For example we heard from mental health organisations that communication in their field are patchy and this results in low awareness of available support among both the public and service providers. Similar issues were raised in relation to support for Dorset’s Armed Forces Community. Again what was needed was better communication of pathways to support, to organisations and the public. As hubs of information and support, libraries have significant potential to support these needs.

Access to space and resources to support or deliver services. During the One Team discussions, other council services explained the importance of accessible physical space to deliver services and support community engagement. Children’s Services valued access to social space, particularly for older children, and the Place service explained they need spaces to engage communities in planning processes and consultations.

The responses from local businesses to the Dorset Council survey also highlighted the value of space for new and existing businesses. Although the overall number of business respondents to the survey was small the top three needs identified were hot-desking or co-working space, networking events, and bookable meeting space.

⁵ Dorset JSNA summary (updated May 2021)
[PowerPoint Presentation \(dorsetcouncil.gov.uk\)](https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk)

4. What opportunities are there for more impact?

MORE IMPACT BY WORKING WITH OTHER LOCAL SERVICES

Other local services identify multiple opportunities for library resources, spaces, and staff to contribute to wider Dorset goals and needs. This amounts to a massive opportunity for increasing the reach and impact of the library service itself, as well as increasing the impact of other local services and partners. But this requires structured discussion and co-production to design and test specific interventions, and clarity over Dorset library service's vision and aims, to enable these opportunities to be prioritised.

Many of the opportunities identified here were developed through the One Team discussions with council services and external partners. However, they also have a high degree of consistency with results from the staff-led task and finish groups, the direct public engagement, and contributions from schools and young people.

Supporting mental health and those with additional support needs

A network of locations to host support for mild/moderate mental health needs. One Team discussions identified gaps in provision for those with mild to moderate mental health needs. We also heard through direct public engagement about the important role of familiar trusted places to go, and people to talk to, for good mental health. The One Team discussions saw libraries as already playing a role in mental health support and saw wide scope for specific offers to fill gaps in provision.

Social prescribing via libraries – signposting, providing, hosting. NHS partners in Dorset are putting significant investment into developing social prescribing (non-clinical preventative

support for physical and mental illness, for example prescribing outdoor walking for mental health or heart health). The increase in social prescribing is driven by the need to manage demand for more costly clinical interventions. The One Team discussions saw significant scope for libraries to build on initiatives such as Books on Prescription to act as a broader platform to signpost and to deliver and host social prescribing events.

Inclusive and adaptive community spaces in libraries for autism and other needs. The One Team discussions identified a need for more adaptive and inclusive spaces, in particular autism friendly and dementia friendly spaces. Other engagements identified similar themes, to ensure people with visual impairment, who cannot read, or speak English as a second language, feel catered to and welcomed through a combination of physical and design features, customer interactions, and hiring options for spaces.

Hubs for vulnerable adults, their carers, and support networks. The One Team discussions identified a range of needs and opportunities to support Dorset's vulnerable adults, their carers and the various networks who provide formal and informal support. This included both individuals who receive local authority social care support packages, and those who self-fund their own care.

Vitality, culture and enrichment

Culture and creativity offer for audiences and creators. A big opportunity for increasing impact identified in the One Team discussions was to build on the existing arts, culture and enrichment offer being delivered by libraries. The socio-economic reach of libraries means that cultural activities in libraries have potential to reach broader and more diverse

audiences than traditional arts and cultural venues. This area of additional impact could also contribute to economic growth outcomes by offering employment to artists, facilitating partners and freelancers to use the space, whilst continuing to deliver against the Dorset Cultural Strategy.

Protecting the environment and sustainability

Skills and knowledge to reduce, reuse, re-cycle, lend and share. The One Team discussions identified a broad area of opportunity around supporting and encouraging sustainable living and community-level action to protect the environment and build skills around re-use and repair. This was also an area that came up in the engagement activities, particular when considering the role libraries could play in sustainable behaviour changes and acting as focal points for community learning about reducing environmental and climate impact.

Access to information and tackling digital exclusion

A consistent theme in the One Team discussions and wider engagement was the growing risk of inequality in access to information and digital and online services. In particular the need for residents with fewer digital skills to have face to face support using digital services was highlighted. This face to face support was seen as vital to reducing digital exclusion, and an extension of the role libraries already play through services including digital champions and adult and community learning along with free WiFi and public access computers.

Supporting local inclusive growth

There are a range of ways the library service can play a more impactful active role in developing the local economy through lifelong learning, resources for entrepreneurs and new businesses, or by promoting library spaces more actively as workspaces for local businesses or remote workers. This would

build on the existing role of libraries in adult and community learning, and building links with national initiatives like the British Library's Business and IP Centre network.

MORE IMPACT WITH LAPSED USERS

The survey provides good indication that many people who do not currently use the library service *have* in fact used libraries in the past. While non-users made up less than 10% of survey responses, even among these, the majority had in fact used libraries in the past.

Most non-users are lapsed users: of the 339 survey respondents who said they were non-users 81% had in fact used one of Dorset's libraries in the past.

The ethnographic research reinforces this with further evidence that most 'non-users' should more accurately be thought of as 'lapsed-users'.

Many non-users also have needs which libraries can help with, often in ways which might prevent those needs becoming greater later on. But poor awareness, negative perceptions and in some cases poor experiences make it harder for the library service to reach many people it could potentially benefit.

5. How can public libraries contribute with more impact across residents' life stages?

We have identified three themes from the engagement which explain why people don't access library services:

1. Communication – many people simply do not know what libraries offer.
2. Discouraged by poor user experience – some people remember less satisfactory experiences, have struggled with accessibility, some have felt 'out of place', or did not enjoy visiting as a child.
3. Life stages – there are stages of life when you need libraries more, and stages when you need them less.

1 - IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Public awareness of the Dorset library offer beyond regular users is low. We see this in the reasons given in the survey by non-users for not using a library (Q30), where "I buy books/get information from the internet" is by far the most common response (followed by "I don't need these services"). A common perception among non-users is that Dorset libraries are either for very young children or older people. None of the ethnographic interviewees knew of the digital offer. Stereotypes about libraries being quiet, austere, and 'being shushed', remain widespread.

The vicious circle this produces is that many residents, for whom libraries could be of use and benefit, do not use library services because they do not know what it offers.

The opportunity for increasing impact is to ensure more people have up to date information about the library service offer.

Enhancing communication and marketing of the library service offer would help increase the service's reach. This could be via other services including adult social care, Jobcentres, or Citizens Advice.

Some *existing* users are also unaware of the full range of the library offer, in particular online library services. Existing users say that personalised e-mails are their preferred method to hear about services.

2 - ADDRESSING USER EXPERIENCE FOR EVERYONE

Many non-users are in fact lapsed users, and a common reason for lapsing out of library use is poor user experience. The strongest evidence for this is in the ethnographic research but it is supported by other engagement data. Some residents have been put off using libraries by less satisfactory or inconvenient experiences, while others have struggled with access (e.g. through sensory impairment or physical disability). Some have felt 'out of place' or are stuck with memories of not enjoying the library as a child.

Less satisfactory or inconvenient experiences include: opening hours that are hard to remember or inconvenient; 'hassle' of needing to have a library card to access public-access computers; struggling to download e-books; forgetting when items were due back; patchy or glitchy WiFi and IT equipment. Perceptions of strict time limits on computer access also discourage use.

This can be solved by ensuring digital resources are up-to-date and appropriate to users' needs. Having Digital Champions, library staff or other support on hand also helps.

Ensuring the online offer is user-friendly would also help those that struggle with the process of accessing e-books online.

Accessibility struggles include: transport and/or parking costs, especially among parents and those with support needs; some partially sighted non-users do not expect the library service to offer anything they can make use of; some non-users with physical disabilities perceive library buildings to be cramped and difficult to move around.

Some accessibility issues are based on perceptions and some on real experience.

Transport and parking were raised as barriers particularly by parents and those with additional support needs. Those who rely on public transport also feel limited in terms of access. Opening hours are also seen by some as unpredictable or unclear.

Despite having measures in place for those with sensory impairment, more could be done to increase awareness of the options for access. This could be done in collaboration with networks or organisations that engage with those with sensory impairment to increase awareness of the offer.

Feeling out of place was a result of:

perception that staff expect all visitors to know what to do to (which could make first time visitors feel uncomfortable); perception that families with noisy children would be made to feel unwelcome; perception of library buildings themselves as 'utilitarian'. When talking about perceptions of libraries from those who don't access them.

"But it's still a scary place for people who have never been into a library and don't understand how they work... that is the battle." – Community organisation, Weymouth focus group.

The opportunity for impact is to build an ongoing understanding of user experience, in particular the root causes of negative

experience, and take steps to ensure everyone feels welcomed, especially first time users.

Making the outside of all library buildings more inviting would help engage more of Dorset's residents and would encourage them to enter. Having a variety of clear signage explaining that library resources are free, and that everyone is welcome, would be beneficial. Additionally, clearly advertising the collections in different languages, and that libraries welcome all families, would encourage many non-users that we interviewed.

3 - FOCUSING ON LIFE STAGES WHERE LIBRARY SERVICES MAKE MOST DIFFERENCE

There are undoubtedly some who never need library services because they have other ways to access resources and help. For many people however their need for libraries comes and goes at different life stages; when they have young children, when studying, when they need to retrain or if they lose their job, when they retire, or lose a spouse.

This means many people go for long periods of time without accessing library services and as a result they forget what is on offer or lose touch with how services have changed.

The majority of those considered to be 'non-users' were in fact 'lapsed users', who had not accessed library services recently. Only a small number of people we encountered through the survey and engagements had never used library services at all. The ethnography highlights that this is an important distinction to make because of what it this means for encouraging participation. For non-users or those who have not visited for many years, the answer will be to communicate what is on offer. However for many lapsed users the challenge is to address why they have not returned and to welcome back those who have used libraries in the past, at the next

point when libraries can help them. This means identifying life stages when libraries can be useful again, positioning the offer to welcome former users back and explaining what has changed and improved.

6. How can the library service become more aligned in delivering shared priorities?

The consultation and engagement exercise has identified many opportunities where library service delivery could more closely align with wider council and community service delivery around shared priorities. As can be seen in section 4 (what opportunities are there for more impact?) the breadth of opportunities is extensive – from opportunities that address accessibility of mental health support, to addressing and supporting behaviour change towards green and sustainable living, to providing vibrant culture and enrichment experiences. The One Team discussions and other engagement discussions have been incredibly positive in identifying a large number of opportunities to collaborate, connect, and deliver more co-ordinated services. Work on some of these priorities has already begun.

The library service must however prioritise what opportunities to pursue. The library service cannot do everything and needs to prioritise areas of collaboration that will be the most fruitful in delivering against its vision and strategic priorities. The service also needs to be more outward facing and more clearly communicate its offer both within the council, and across Dorset communities.

As presented earlier in this report, even though the library services does communicate its offer through council webpages, e-newsletters, social media and posters/leaflets in libraries, we heard that large proportions of the community and council are still unaware of current library offers. We heard from community-based organisations that the library service should reach out more when

looking to shape their offer. We heard from council representatives that there was a great deal of untapped potential in collaboration that just needs to be explored.

In terms of being more outward facing, and more clearly communicating the offer, some areas to consider are:

Make partnership development part of service development roles

The library service already has a service development team whose role it is to develop the library service offer. Currently this includes service development around the national [Universal Library Offers](#). This also involves developing the cross-cutting cultural offer, working with artists, arts organisations, other council services and bidding to external funders such as Arts Council England.

Over time it has been understandable that services have lost sight of each other's priorities and opportunities to connect and work more closely. The wider One Team council transformation approach covering all services provides a fantastic opportunity to expand existing service development roles to include strategic partnership development, internal and external to the council.

Example In 2020/21 Bradford library service negotiated a £700,000 contribution to its annual budget from the council's health and wellbeing budget as the first of a recurring annual cost-sharing with public health⁶. This is equivalent to around 2% of Bradford's total Public Health Grant. The basis of the public health contribution is that libraries make a

⁶ [Bradford public health contribution to library services as reported in national press.](#)

significant contribution to well-being and are a preventative service.

Having programmed discussions throughout the year with statutory and community partners

A named person or group and regular points in time where specified leads from services come together to identify what the priorities are and where there could be opportunities for joint-working or collaboration.

Agreed service offers to communicate the library offer

These would be concise statements to explain the library service offer to others in a way that shows the benefits of the offer.

Example Essex Libraries developed a new methodology for early years Rhyme Times sessions designed to have positive effect on maternal mental health. The new service offer was designed with expert input. It was documented as a workbook so that other library staff could deliver it as intended, and so that partner organisations could see how it works. Public-facing descriptions were also produced to explain what it is, encourage participation, and explains the benefits to the public.

Having clear outcomes measures
Conveying the outcomes the library service is measuring itself against can provide a ways of framing conversations that seek to identify opportunities for identifying shared priorities and ambitions.

Example Norfolk library service have developed a structured approach to measuring outcomes which they call their 'impact tool'. Before this staff would collect anecdotes and examples of impact, but not in a rigorous way. The impact tool is simple to use but more structured. It is used to gather information about strategic outcomes which are important to the council as a whole e.g. new qualifications that users have achieved, or changes in physical or mental health. Because it is more systematic, information can be easily tracked and compared. The impact tool enables data to be presented in a variety of ways including reports on progress, primary outcomes and additional outcomes. Comparisons can be made over time, or between locations.

7. How will Covid recovery and wider societal factors affect library services over the coming 10 years?

Many societal trends will have a direct impact on the need for library services:

- Automation is creating an upheaval in the labour market which is resulting in many workers having to re-skill, especially those with low skills.
- Climate change is creating new needs for comfortable space to work, study and do homework during periods of extreme weather, and also creates a need for community education around adaptation and mitigation.
- Demographic changes not least population aging simultaneously puts resources pressure on public services, and requires new public service models based on prevention and community resilience.

In the medium term however, the shadow of the pandemic is the most influential driver of change affecting library services. The pandemic has encouraged many more people to use online services for ordering physical goods. This has in turn meant many people are more familiar and confident using digital services. But as we move out of the pandemic people also want to get back to physical events and activities. Many people have also changed how they use their time, and where they spend their lives. It may be that by doing more 'routine' things online, and by working remotely where they can, individuals can free-up more time to take part in events, activities, and social interactions which they value.

The pandemic has also revealed digital inequalities not just between those with and without the skills to access online services, but those with and without the financial means to. It has also shown that digital access

can be a lifeline and provide independence for those who are vulnerable and or housebound.

Daily routines are still in flux and may not settle for some time

We still cannot say what lasting change Covid has led to: communities and public services alike are still changing and adapting. Some trends have been accelerated, others have been put into reverse but there are clear themes from our engagement which are directly relevant to developing the service.

A significant factor is that for much of 2020 and 2021, Dorset's library buildings were closed. Those services that could be were reconfigured, and like other local public services, many aspects of the service had to be put on hold.

As restrictions have been lifted, national data collected by Libraries Connected, indicates what is happening in public libraries. This shows that by December 2021 borrowing of physical books had bounced back to around 84% of pre-Covid levels, in line with high street footfall generally. Again, on a national scale in the second half of 2021, library event attendance swung from digital to physical with an estimated 1.7m people at live events from July-December 2021. At the same time, many of those who discovered digital and audio lending from their libraries for the first time during the pandemic have continued. Digital lending, although a small percentage overall is now double pre-Covid levels having increased from around 3-5% to around 10%.

We have also seen in the Dorset survey engagements that digital lending is popular among many existing library users (along with the ability to manage borrowing through

online accounts), but beyond regular users the digital offer is not widely known.

Looking more broadly it has been clear from our public engagement that for Dorset residents (library users and non-users alike) there is a great deal of uncertainty about things like visiting the library and wider attitudes about going to shops and venues are still evolving, as are choices about ordering online versus collecting in-person. This seems likely to remain the case in the medium term.

Ordering in but still wanting to get out

For most residents the library service is still synonymous with the physical library buildings. Many library users have not visited since before the pandemic, and changing opening times over the various lockdowns and easings means the risk of a wasted trip is a further deterrent. We also heard that just like groceries and other goods, many (although not all) have fallen out of the habit of going in-person to get things, and are more likely to order online or make do with what they have at home. This may explain why survey responses from non-users suggests that book delivery is one way non-users would be encouraged to use the library service more.

But we also spoke with people, families in particular, who relish opportunities to get themselves and the children out of the house, not for essentials but for change of scene and to meet-up with friends.

In the survey, among those who answered a question about in-person versus online activities 75% said they preferred a mixture and disabled respondents were even more supportive (82% wanted to retain a mixture). However, 25% of survey respondents said they preferred in-person only. Many also said that the pandemic ending would encourage them to use libraries more frequently.

The service's online capability has transformed

We heard from staff how multiple activities, services, and programmes were moved rapidly online e.g., Order and Collect, online early years sessions, author events, Census support, virtual school assemblies for Summer Reading Challenge. The scale and pace amounted to a different way of working. Not just using new technology, but working differently, more collaboratively and testing ideas out in more iterative ways, more focused on how the service could help communities in practical ways. One member of staff crystallised the approach as “if we *could* help, we *would* help the community”. It made previous ways of working feel siloed and ponderous.

Working in new ways during the pandemic has created a deeper feeling among staff of connection to the community, by focusing on their needs, and also hearing the reaction and comments back about the difference they had made. There have been other positives too, volunteers have ‘blossomed’ as they have taken on new tasks.

Some old ways of working need refreshing

The pandemic has also enabled staff to see the pre-covid service in a new perspective. For example the online work with schools which has reached more children, shows the limits of the pre-Covid approach. We have also heard how Covid and wider debates about inclusion over the past two years have meant previous activities can be seen in new perspective. We heard from a group of adults with learning disabilities that while they enjoyed organised library visits, library staff did not always fully understand their needs, leading to uncomfortable moments around lost cards and PINs, or those who struggled with concepts like lending and being overdue.

Different places have had very different experiences

Like all physical services library visits have been affected by lockdown and continue to be affected by changing attitudes to visiting high streets and venues, as well as amended services and timetables to account for staff shortages. In terms of high street and town centres in Dorset there is now a wealth of useful data to help understand different effects in different places. One particularly useful source is [data collated by the Financial Times](#) which enables comparisons between places and their levels of local high street sales during the pandemic and now.

This shows that Dorset high streets and town and village centres have each been affected by the pandemic in very different ways. As integral elements of town and village life this indicates a number of place-specific issues which libraries must adapt to. For example there are some places where more people are staying local now than before the pandemic, with more high street activity, and therefore more opportunities for libraries to reach local residents, perhaps at different times. Other places are now seeing suppressed high street activity and in these places libraries could play an active role in revitalisation and recovery.

Dorchester. Looking at Dorchester West and Poundbury which covers the main high street areas (and library), the data shows Dorchester high street spending was badly hit with local in-person sales down by 19%. As a visitor town, in-person spend from people living more than 10 miles away has been a large part of the economy and is now significantly down. Food, drink and entertainment spend is also down substantially. This points to a significant loss of high street footfall, including visitors from further afield, which has still not recovered.

Weymouth. Looking at Weymouth Town, Melcombe Regis and Rodwell which covers the seafront and shopping areas (and library),

the data shows Weymouth was also hard hit, although not as badly as Dorchester. Local in-person sales are down by 9%. Interestingly however, spending by 10+ mile visitors rose slightly during the pandemic as did eating, drinking and entertainment spend. This points to changes in behaviours more than simple loss of footfall. It seems people might still be visiting Weymouth, but with different needs in mind.

Ferndown. Looking at Ferndown Town which includes the local shops and library, the data shows high street activity has been far more resilient than Dorchester and Weymouth with local in-person spend down only 3%. Even though a lot of in-person spending is from over-75s who might be more cautious, this has fallen only very slightly. This points to Ferndown having benefitted from people staying local, perhaps feeling more confident shopping locally than in larger towns.

Wimborne Minster. Data for the centre of Wimborne Minster which includes the library also shows a more resilient high street with local in-person sales down only 2%. In fact, in-person grocery sales rose dramatically by 83% according to the data. Not only that but increases in online sales by local businesses mean total local sales are actually higher now than pre-pandemic. The Wimborne data suggests big changes in behaviour, especially the increase in local in-person grocery shopping. This could be because more households are spending more time locally rather than commuting to work.

[Families who disappeared from view are a concern](#)

Public libraries are not a type of service, like A&E for example, where the aim is to reduce demand. They are more like health screening and other forms of prevention where the aim is to intervene early with the widest possible reach in the knowledge the service benefits everyone and in some cases prevents disadvantage and poor outcomes. In that

context, there is growing national data about the need to reach and support families who disappeared from view over the pandemic. Research from the National Literacy Trust has shown that while many younger children enjoyed enhanced quality time with parents during lockdown, chatting, playing and reading, there are other families where children's development suffered. The Trust highlights new research from primary schools showing that despite many families spending more time together, more than three-quarters of schools felt children starting Reception in Autumn 2020 needed more support than those in previous cohorts ([Bowyer-Crane et al 2021](#)).

For the library service this presents a challenge of identifying families where children are being left behind. Similarly there are many residents who require additional support to access online services but if they can access the right help to access digital services the long term benefit will be greater independence and potentially reduced need.

8. Conclusions

Dorset Council is pushing forward a major transformation programme and this is being done collaboratively with residents, communities, and partners. The intended result of this transformation is for Dorset Council's services to be more effective as early intervention, make better use of assets, contribute to managing demand, and help remove digital and economic inequalities.

Dorset, like everywhere else, is also now recovering from two years of pandemic upheaval which will leave lasting changes. Alongside this are other societal forces which directly affect public services; automation, climate change, and demographic change.

What our work shows, is that within this context Dorset's library service has significant potential to generate far more impact in ways which are preventative, which reduce pressures on other services, and which get as much benefit as possible from the library service's assets. We have also seen that other service delivery teams and partner organisations are brimming with ideas for aligning more closely with the library service to increase their own reach and impact and manage demand.

Libraries are valued for their unique combination of physical resources and human help. But our work highlights a difficult asymmetry. Access to free reading materials for all ages for pleasure, learning, and literacy, is by far the most recognised part of the service and highly valued by many users. It is also the part of the service which is most transactional and where many users have already shifted to managing their borrowing via the Dorset libraries' website and apps.

On the other hand, events and activities, free access to digital skills support, space to meet and study, and access to computers and WiFi make a big difference to users' lives, but

awareness of these is low or non-existent beyond those who use them (including service partners as well as the public). These are also areas where significant added value comes from face-to-face human support.

Our work highlights four areas of action which must be taken to realise the potential of the library service.

Communication: develop more effective communication of the full breadth of the library service offer to existing users and to those who do not currently use libraries (but who could benefit if they did). This requires particular skillsets, and a structured plan, but is essential to enable the service to reach a far larger proportion of those residents who stand to benefit from the library service offer, and in ways which help other local services meet and manage demand.

Customer support: prioritise user interactions which are relational and add value (events, activities, human help, support for community groups, advice, guidance) over those which are transactional (borrowing and returning items, making payments or bookings), and encourage more people to complete basic tasks digitally. This will enable staff to focus on activities with the greatest impact, and on users with the greatest needs. This also requires the right skillsets and a clear plan.

Collaboration: formalise relationships with other service partners through regular discussions with clear remits; many partners can easily identify countless opportunities for libraries to support, enhance, and reduce strain on their services. These need co-ordination, development, investment, and most important of all, well-reasoned prioritisation.

Clarity: this report identifies more opportunities for increasing impact than the

service can realistically pursue. A process of prioritisation is essential. This requires the library service clearly to state its purpose and vision, how it contributes to Dorset-wide priorities, and what the service is uniquely placed to do. This detail will form part of a draft library strategy, which will be subject to public consultation. The feedback following public consultation will provide the framework for prioritisation i.e. to decide which opportunities best contribute to the agreed purpose and vision. By using the agreed strategy as a framework for prioritisation the service will be able to develop a prioritised plan of action which enables it to be a more impactful contributor to the lives of all of Dorset's communities.

Appendices

- A. What parts of the library service are valued by current users of Dorset libraries? **The distinct value of the current service for certain communities.**

- B. What needs have been identified within Dorset's communities and across other local services? **Needs in terms of life events and types of residents.**

- C. Ethnographic research report [published separately]

Appendix A - What parts of the library service are valued by current users of Dorset libraries?

The table below presents themes from the public engagement about what the public value and see as important. This comes from targeted focus groups and other direct engagement with existing users, non-users, and protected groups. They help to develop an understanding of what we heard about who is benefitting from library services and why. The library service is open to all, but it has distinct value for certain groups within the community and invaluable offers and resources for those that are going through specific life events. These include families, children and young people, those who are socially isolated, those seeking skill development or undertaking education, those who are less affluent who may not have access to vital resources and individuals with varying additional needs.

Families

Libraries fulfil a range of purposes for new parents - giving them somewhere to interact with other parents and an opportunity to get out of the house. Many early years parents expressed how busy their lives can be and they therefore valued the ability to renew books on the app for when they are on the go. Early years representatives stressed the importance of establishing a reading habit with young children.

Those with additional support needs

We heard how some members of the community value the ability to develop a rapport with staff. Staff have then been able to understand needs and offer guidance and support that they feel would best address them. We heard some members of the community that some provision is available in easy-read formats, especially with e-books.

Those undertaking education

Many stated that libraries are a place to access a range of education resources or provision that assisted with learning and skill development. Most important to highlight is that those benefiting from these resources could be of any age: from early years and school aged children through to adults changing careers.

Low income and digital exclusion

Digital champions were a valued source of face-to-face support for individuals that are unfamiliar with technology and the digital world. The fact that the library service is free was quoted as important, especially for those from areas of socio-economic deprivation.

Those experiencing isolation

Those who are rurally isolated valued the click and collect services (which operated during library closures in the pandemic) and the home library service as these provide vital access points to services. We heard that isolation is a particular issue amongst older members of the community. But that the opportunity to visit library services and engage in group activities particularly helped address this isolation.

Appendix B - What needs have been identified within Dorset's communities and across other local services?

The tables below present themes from the public engagement and other data which relate to community need.

Needs in terms of life events
Pregnancy and becoming new parents: a stage in life when there is a need to access new and different services (health, education, benefits advice), and understand how to meet the needs of children, parents, and the family as a whole.
Early years: there is a need to access information, resources, and activities to support physical, mental, and social development. This is also a specific life stage for parents who may be further away from usual social interactions themselves.
Primary and secondary school ages: supplementing education with age-appropriate enrichment activities outside of school hours.
Further/higher education (teenagers and adults): further development of knowledge and skills requires access to educational resources, training and support. There is also a need for dedicated study space and facilities such as desks, computers and printing and scanning.
Job-seeking: requires skills development that may be job-role specific, but also in developing skills to apply for jobs. Increasingly the application process requires access to online or digital services.
Unemployment and accessing benefits: there may be a need to access and understand benefits, or other government, services. These are increasingly being provided online so there is a need for digital access, and the skills to do so.
Providing care: this may be required at any age (for example children or young people caring for parents, or older adults caring for elderly relatives). Caring responsibilities can impact on areas of life such as education, working or social lives. There is a need to access health and government services.
Bereavement: this may be relevant at any age. There is a need to engage with wider government and community services. This can also impact mental health and wellbeing in many ways.
Moving within or relocation into Dorset: Relocation into Dorset means that new residents will need to become familiar with local services and opportunities for education, work and/or social networks.

Needs in terms of different types of resident and demographics	
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spaces to take their children to which are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Practical (can accommodate pushchairs) ○ Social (where parents can meet others and spend time informally – with facilities and furniture that accommodates this) ○ Safe (for children to play) ○ Free (often the places where parents would bring their children charge for access) ○ Accessible to families when they need them (in terms of opening times and locations) • Access to free/low-cost resources for children – (children need many educational/social resources which can be costly). • Support for parents who don't read to their children (we heard that this has an impact on children's development. Often parents who don't read to their children are facing barriers such as a lack of confidence) • Support for new parents (including mothers who are pregnant) – there isn't much support elsewhere • Clubs to support children with homework outside of school.
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Places and spaces accessible outside of school hours for youth to relax/explore interests and spend time • Spaces to study – (particularly college age students) Social activities for college age • Job/skills development opportunities – to support development and help retain local talent • Book clubs for teenagers (this was identified as a gap)
Carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to support, particularly to address isolation and impacts of caring responsibilities on other areas of living.
Those who are isolated including rurally isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social activities to encourage meeting and talking to others and building relationships • Access to general services and support. • Access to good jobs
Entrepreneurs and businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to technology and software to support businesses and business development • Access to advice on starting a business to support development and retain local talent • Spaces to work particularly in light of changes due to the pandemic
Digitally excluded or low-level digital skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and resources to access online services • Support to develop digital skills to access services and good employment

Needs in terms of different types of resident and demographics	
Low level skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to courses/tutors/other support to enable low-level/early career progression Support to improve literacy and skills
Low income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for low cost/free services, community events, cultural activities • Access to support and advice – financial and wider, e.g., housing, managing time, stress • Access to resources and internet – e.g., Wi-Fi, computers, printers – essential to many day-to-day activities including finding/applying for/retaining a job, accessing council services, staying connected to others. • Access to warm, safe spaces.
Those with additional support needs (for example those with learning difficulties or disabilities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spaces that accommodate those requiring additional support – for example spaces which are autism and dementia friendly. • Activities that are tailored to specific needs – for example reading groups for those who are partially sighted or blind. • Resources that are tailored to meet needs of those with additional support needs (e.g. Easy read signs for those with learning difficulties, who may be partially sighted or for other support needs) • Extra support or guidance in using resources – e.g. orientation of the library • Literacy support for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities • Access to information, resources, activities for those who can't leave the home. • Face to face support from staff for those who want to/ need to talk in order to access services/address other needs (e.g. isolation, mental health issues, disabilities).
Armed Forces Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to relevant local and national services – there is currently low-level access to services. • Support for those experiencing digital exclusion and social isolation – regular relocation can lead to isolation and exclusion from communities • Mental health support for younger veterans • Support with assisting those with foreign qualifications to become qualified in this country – e.g. through training opportunities/advice and guidance • Access resources/support/activities whenever they need it (e.g. outside of normal working hours).

Needs in terms of different types of resident and demographics	
Equality, diversity, and inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Places that demonstrate (through services offered) that all groups are included and are welcome • Places that can be safe spaces for particular groups. • Places that provide information, resources and support in ways that are accessible to all groups and address intersectionality • Equal access to opportunities – e.g. training and leadership / progression through higher education and careers
Community groups who seek to address a range of needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spaces to meet with clientele <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Some that offer privacy • Access to networks of other groups/businesses/services to have greater reach and access information, resources, expertise they and others may need
All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Support with lifestyle changes towards more sustainable living (Libs could provide refill stations, clothes swaps, Green Champions) ○ More accessible resources and activities for young people and adults on sustainable living and the environment • Health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Support/resources/activities for health and wellbeing – stress management, healthy eating ○ Offer access to green space (where appropriate) ○ Specific resources for address needs in men and women ○ Increasing accessing and take up of information amongst men ○ Support for women going through the menopause • Sense of community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Spaces that bring people together to help build sense of community that many people need • Independent living • Resources and support to encourage independent living and for people to begin to access their own support and advice.

Appendix C – Ethnographic research report [report published separately]

Analogue Strategies

Dorset Council

Research Report

Off The Books

Why some people in Dorset don't use libraries



Created

Jan/Feb 2021