

## **Council – 23 February 2017**

### **Library Petition: Save Aldridge Library**

#### **1.0 Summary**

- 1.1 This report is in response to a petition opposing the possible closure of Aldridge Library as part of the draft budget proposals concerning the Library Service for 2017/18.
- 1.2 The petition, “Save Aldridge Library”, was submitted to the council on Monday 9 January 2017 by Cllr Murray. The petition contains c.1,540 signatures and is worded as follows:-

*“We the undersigned, respectfully request that the council reviews its proposal to close our much needed local libraries, which are also a hub for our local communities and seek to find savings in another way. This is essential for the benefit of all Walsall residents and in particular for the people of all ages, who reside in Aldridge.”*

- 1.3 The Council’s petition scheme provides that:-

If a petition contains at least 1,500 signatures it will be debated at a meeting of the Council. This means that the issues raised in the petition will be discussed at a meeting to which all Councillors can attend and speak. The Council will endeavour to consider the petition at its next meeting although on some occasions this may not be possible and consideration will then take place at the following meeting. The petition organiser will be given 5 minutes to present the petition at the meeting and the petition will then be discussed by Councillors for a maximum of 15 minutes. The Council will decide how to respond to the petition at this meeting.

They may decide to take the action that the petition requests; not to take the action requested for reasons put forward in the debate, or to ask for further information. Where the issue is one where the Cabinet are required to make the final decision the Council will decide to make recommendations to the Cabinet. The petition organiser will receive written confirmation of this decision and this will be published on our website.

#### **2.0 Recommendation**

- 2.1 That Council note the decision of Cabinet of 8 February 2017 (see 3.6 below) for the redesign of the borough’s statutory Library Service, which includes the retention of Aldridge Library, and
- 2.2 That the content of the petition be noted and consideration be given to the contents before the finalisation of budget proposals for 2017/18.

### **3.0 Background Information**

- 3.1. As part of the draft budget for 2017/18 there was a proposal to save £2.9m from the library service which, if approved, would mean the closure of up to fifteen libraries from the current network of sixteen static libraries.
- 3.2 Residents were consulted on three options, each to be within a budget of approximately £1m, these being:-
- a) To reduce the number of static library sites from sixteen down to one (Lichfield Street, Walsall), retain one Mobile Library Bus and the Home Delivery Service. The single library site would be redesigned and developed as a “Hub” in conjunction with an integrated Local History Centre and Leather Museum. The one Mobile Library Bus would be used to deliver a library service to areas of the borough with reduced access and greater need.
  - b) To reduce the number of static library sites from sixteen to a maximum of five dependent on cost. The proposal should retain a Mobile Library Bus service and the Home Delivery Service. The libraries to be retained would be selected on consideration of viability.
  - c) To suggest alternative proposals subject to a budget limit of £1m.
- 3.3 During the consultation period people could have their say via a range of methods; (figures are at the time of report writing):-
- a) Online via the council’s generic budget questionnaire (available 27 October to 31 December 2016 - 3 responses received) and / or via a more detailed online questionnaire specifically for libraries (available 27 October to 31 December 2016 - 182 responses received),
  - b) 11,600 postal questionnaires were sent to households all over the borough. A random sample of addresses were selected ensuring every household had an equal chance of being sent a questionnaire. This approach meant that both library users and non users were engaged in the consultation process and given the opportunity to have their say. Larger print and alternative formats were available on request (1,212 responses received),
  - c) 94 emails were received along with 17 letters,
  - d) On-site, unannounced, face to face interviews with library users were completed at every static library, the Leather Museum and Local History Centre & Archive (just over 100 interviews were completed).
- 3.4 Consultation on the budget proposal for the Library Service closed on 31 December 2016. Feedback from the consultation was reported back to Cabinet and Councillors considered this information when finalising its budget proposals on 8 February 2017.

- 3.6 After due consideration of all information and the consultation responses, The Cabinet's preferred model (Option 1) to have the Lichfield Street "Hub" (including Leather Museum and Local History Centre & Archive) along with one mobile and the Home Delivery Service, on its own, did not meet the feedback from the council's consultation exercise. As a result Cabinet decided to opt for a Town Centre and District Centre Library Service with the addition of a Community Library, augmented by volunteers, at Streetly.

The redesigned service will therefore now consist of:-

- A Walsall Town Centre "Hub" – the Local History Centre & Archive service will move to the Central Library building in Lichfield Street, Walsall
  - 5 District Centres libraries at: Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall
  - A Community Library based at Streetly: augmented with volunteers who will support this service. This model came as a direct result of input from the community
  - One mobile library and a Home Delivery Service will be retained. The mobile service route to be redesigned to meet 'Marmot' objectives. This model will address the areas of greatest need in the borough
  - Walsall Leather Museum will remain at its current Wisemore venue, reflecting the significant economic heritage. Officers will also seek out new commercial opportunities to maximise income.
- 3.7 The council has now finalised its budget spending and income assumptions, and as a result, has been able to release further funds which members have chosen to prioritise to allow the "Hub" plus local library offer. Through Members making a variety of choices across the whole breadth of the council's budget, additional funding has been identified which allows a total budget of £2.5m to be allocated to the Library Service, Local History Centre and Leather Museum to deliver a service which is in-line with residents' feedback.
- 3.8 Using the universally recognised two mile radius (not a legal requirement) to each library coverage, the South East corner of the borough would not receive library provision. It is acceptable to assume that access to Birmingham's Kingstanding library could provide a service however this would be outside of Walsall's own library service. A proposition to support the "Save Streetly Library" campaign group would mean that the uncovered area would fall under Walsall's provision. One small area of sparsely populated Walsall would still not meet the two mile radius however these dwellings are very close to the A34 Birmingham Road, a major bus route and links to the town centre. If necessary, consideration to redesigning the Mobile Library bus route may also be required.

A map of the borough showing the libraries and the two mile radius is attached.

3.9 Nine current libraries will not form part of the Council's redesigned statutory Library Service. The library service from the following sites will cease from 30 June 2017:

- Beechdale
- Blakenall
- New Invention
- Pelsall
- Pleck
- Pheasey
- Rushall
- South Walsall
- Walsall Wood

3.10 To mitigate the closure of these libraries the Service will approach community organisations to assess their interest in providing community "book exchanges", together with other community activities, either from the former library building or from their own venue. These facilities could provide access to books for loan to local residents who may prefer that facility in their local community.

3.11 The council has invited staff to consider considering voluntary redundancy and will look to minimise compulsory redundancies wherever possible.

3.12 In previous years (2014/15 and 2015/16) work was undertaken with local community organisations to assess their interest in a partnership to provide community book exchange facilities in their local areas. It was confirmed to the Corporate & Public Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee of 24 November 2016 that this work would not commence until 2017, once the public consultation had closed and the shape of the redesigned service had been confirmed by Cabinet. On 14 December 2016 Cabinet noted this, together with feedback and recommendations from other Scrutiny Committees, to consider the feedback in preparation for final budget recommendations in February.

## **Background papers**

Cabinet papers of 8 February 2017

On-line consultation information via [www.walsall.gov.uk/haveyoursay](http://www.walsall.gov.uk/haveyoursay)

Including:-

Visitor data 2014/15

Visitor data 2015/16

High level budget information

Accessibility paper

Lichfield Street "hub" paper

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**Walsall Hub (Library & Local History Centre) & 5 District Centres and Leather Museum & Community Book Exchange at Streetly, Kingstanding with 2 mile buffer**

