

Council – 23 February 2017

Library Petition: Save Walsall Leather Museum

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report is in response to a petition opposing the possible closure of Walsall's Leather Museum as part of the draft budget proposals concerning the Library Service for 2017/18.
- 1.2 The petition, "Save Walsall Leather Museum", was submitted to the council on Monday 9 January 2017 by Cllr Cooper. The petition contains c.2,534 signatures and is worded as follows:-

"Walsall Leather Museum is a successful, award-winning attraction which fosters a sense of local pride by celebrating the Borough's unique leatherworking heritage. It has an outstanding reputation for its educational work. It attracts visitors from all over the world, as well as many thousands of local families.

"We believe that the proposal to close the museum and replace it with a token display in Walsall Centre Library dishonours the achievements of generations of local men and women. It will deny children access to their heritage and culturally impoverish the town. Removed from its current Victorian premises the museum will lose most of its meaning and character. We believe this action will be hugely damaging to Walsall's image and reputation for years to come.

"We ask Walsall Council to consider alternative solutions which would keep the Leather Museum in its current location, as an atmospheric, vibrant, and much loved asset for the Borough."

- 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, Local History Centre & Archive and the retention of the Leather Museum at its current site, 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, a proposal was put forward to relocate the Leather Museum from its current site in Wisemore, and to integrate it into the Lichfield Street Central Library building. This was part of a wider proposal to save £2.9m from the library service.
- 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 As a result the Leather Museum is to remain at its existing Wisemore site. Officers will undertake to make the exhibits more attractive, bring in new displays and approach the service with a much more commercial approach.


A map of the borough showing the Leather Museum with a two mile radius is attached.

Background papers

Cabinet papers of 8 February 2017

On-line consultation information via www.walsall.gov.uk/haveyoursay

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'SN', with a stylized, elongated horizontal stroke at the end.

Simon Neilson
Executive Director Economy and Environment
15 February 2017

Leather Museum retained in situ

