

Cabinet – 1 March 2006

The modernisation of the library service

Portfolio: Councillor Garry Perry, Culture & Leisure

Service Area: Leisure, Culture and Lifelong Learning

Wards: All

Forward Plan: Yes

Summary of report

This report presents a programme for the modernisation of Walsall's library service. This programme will enable an increase in active membership, improved satisfaction, enhanced opening hours and improved performance. Specifically, the programme will:

- improve the condition of its buildings and ensure they remain safe and attractive for staff and users
- provide more new books more quickly,
- significantly improve the facilities for users,
- open longer hours
- devote more staff time to providing high quality customer service.

Some developments have already been agreed and achieved, such as the opening of a new library in the Blakenall Village Centre and the development of a much needed new library at Brownhills, which is planned to open around May 2006. Some libraries, such as Rushall, Pelsall and Streetly, have benefited from the council's planned maintenance capital programme and others have an opportunity for redevelopment brought about by specific local circumstances, e.g. Forest Gate and Bentley.

National and Local Drivers

In February 2003, the government published **Framework for the Future**, its vision for English public libraries over the next ten years. This stresses the need for libraries to have the capacity to deliver transformation and focuses on the three key areas of: 1) books, learning and reading; 2) digital citizenship; and 3) community and civic values.

In 2001, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published a set of public library standards. These provide qualitative and quantitative measures for what the government deems to be a comprehensive and efficient library service. These standards have now been revised in 2005-06. To date Walsall has performed satisfactorily against these standards but from 2006-07 they are being supplemented by a range of 'Impact Measures', designed to assess libraries' performance in relation to the following shared priorities:

- Promoting healthier communities
- Raising standards across our schools

- Promoting the economic vitality of localities
- Improving the quality of life for children, young people, families at risk and older people
- Safer and stronger communities

These measures will be included as part of future Continuous Performance Assessment (CPA) and it is essential that Walsall not only maintains its ability to meet the standards but also develops its library service in a way that can demonstrate a contribution to achieving these priorities.

Locally, in December 2003, Walsall Libraries commissioned MORI to conduct a survey of Walsall residents to discover their views on the library service. Key messages were that libraries had too few of the right books, communicated poorly with existing and potential customers, buildings and facilities were shabby, and opening hours were insufficient.

Consequently, in 2004 Walsall Libraries embarked on a major review intended to enable the service to modernise and achieve excellence by 2008. The review analysed in detail the performance and cost effectiveness of the service, comparing the service in Walsall with that in other local authorities and consulting extensively with staff and customers.

The Library Modernisation Plan

To address the issues highlighted above and provide the framework for the development of a modern, locally based and customer focussed service - a programme of building and service developments is proposed to take place over a three year period to 2008/09.

Much has already been achieved in 2005/06:

Libraries to open:

- Blakenall replacing the aging library at Coalpool
- Brownhills due to open in Spring 2006

Libraries to benefit from regeneration/relocation projects

- Bentley report to Cabinet 8th February
- Forest Gate report to Cabinet 8th February

Libraries refurbished:

- Rushall achieved

The full proposal for library modernisation for the next three years is detailed below:

Year 1 - 2006/07

Libraries to open:

- Brownhills
- New Invention Square (Forest Gate) report to Cabinet 8th February

Libraries to be refurbished:

- Bloxwich
- Aldridge

Public library service to cease on school site:

- Sneyd
- Furzebank

Year 2 - 2007/08

Libraries to benefit from Regeneration Projects: *(these improvements are dependant on regeneration schemes going ahead. Should they fail to do so, alternative refurbishment will take place)*

- South Walsall (as part of any Joseph Leckie development)
- Willenhall (as part of proposed town centre regeneration)
- Pelsall (as part of health centre proposals)

Libraries to be refurbished

- Streetly (part achieved in 2005/06)

Libraries to be refurbished:

- Pleck

Libraries to be opened:

- Bentley

Year 3 - 2008/09

Libraries to be opened:

- Walsall Wood (*relocated to a new site*)*

Libraries to be refurbished:

- Pheasey
- Beechdale
- Darlaston

**An opportunity has arisen for an earlier relocation of Walsall Wood and the timescale is being investigated*

These proposals will deliver 3 new library buildings with the potential for 3 more as part of regeneration projects. All libraries will be refurbished to provide a more attractive and welcoming environment which offers a wider choice of books, services and activities tailored to the local community, enhanced learning opportunities and more community based information. There is also an opportunity to investigate the role of these libraries as local access points for council services and information. These could include a variety of transactions such as recycling enquiries, requests for new bins, reporting complaints, getting faults repaired and cash collection.

As far as possible, refurbishment will take place with minimal impact on customers. In many cases, there need be very little interruption of services or only involve the suspension of the service for around 3 weeks to enable relocation. Where a more extended period of closure is unavoidable while building work takes place (such as at Bentley), alternatives such as a regular service from the mobile library will ensure as much continuity as possible

The service will be restructured to improve customer focus and enable the delivery of opening hours which reflect local community needs. There will be three models for this service delivery;

- District libraries will offer a wide range of stock from bestsellers to first time writers, hobbies to serious non fiction. They will have broad opening hours covering, at least, six days a week and a learning space with a suite of computers for independent and group learning. District libraries will support smaller libraries in terms of staffing, outreach work and expertise. There will be a district library in every Local Neighbourhood Partnership area.
- The smaller “neighbourhood” libraries will offer a service that is tailored to reflect the identified needs of the local community in their area. Stock, computer facilities and opening hours will be specifically aimed at that community ensuring that the library is open at times when people want to use it and offers a very focussed, customer based service. To ensure access to the wider selection of books available at district libraries, a sophisticated request service will be freely available and a daily delivery service will ensure minimal delay.
- The Central Library will be the flagship of the service supporting the library network with a complete range of stock, open seven days a week, with subject specialists on hand to provide advice and guidance, both in stock selection and directly to the customer.

The restructure will address issues of service performance, operational delivery and greater efficiency and effectiveness. It will also offer staff better support for the front-line, better professional support and provide opportunities for personal development

Recommendations

- (1) That Cabinet approve the four year modernisation programme for the Library Service as outlined above
- (2) That Cabinet approve a departure from current policy, on this occasion, to earmark receipts from the disposal of current library sites to cover the cost of re-provisioning and refurbishing libraries in the capital programme

Resource and legal consideration

These proposals will release around £920,000 to the council in capital receipts from the sale of the sites of those libraries proposed for closure or relocation. The proposals require an investment of £1,005,000 from the Capital Programme over 4 years. There are no revenue implications arising from these proposals and the subsequent staffing restructure will be achieved within existing budgets. In addition, the modernisation plan should deliver procurement and efficiency savings.

It should be noted that the council has a legal obligation to provide a Library Service that is “efficient and comprehensive” under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. “Efficient and comprehensive” is defined by the national Public Library Standards which came into force in April 2004 and revised in 2005/06.

Citizen impact

The modernisation plan will deliver one major library in each Local Neighbourhood Partnership area and a network of smaller community libraries. Every resident will have a static library service point within 2 miles of their home. Smaller libraries will be designated “community” libraries and improvements to the service and opening hours will be based on identified local community needs, developing them as “community spaces” responsive to the people in their local area. The service will continue its progress towards offering as many services as possible on-line, 24 hours a day.

Community safety

The library service will continue to ensure that its facilities maintain the best possible environment for its staff and customers alike. It will continue to offer organised events and activities aimed at disadvantaged, disaffected and vulnerable groups, (as shown by the ‘Ready Steady Summer’ programmes in 2004 and 2005) providing positive alternatives and free learning opportunities. All libraries have property marking kits available for loan.

Environmental impact

Priorities and targets will aim to offer the people of Walsall access to a wide variety of learning opportunities, the ability to improve life chances and encourage civic pride and a sense of place. This will seek to promote a knowledge and awareness of the environment and develop community identity. The specific building improvements will have a positive impact on the local environment and aid the regeneration of local communities.

Performance and risk management issues

A full risk assessment of the modernisation plan will be carried out to identify the major risks and the service action plan will contain a robust process of monitoring and review followed by clear management and control mechanisms. Priorities, targets and risks will be monitored by the Libraries and Heritage Management Team through the Library Service Plan 2006-07 and subsequent plans until completion of the project.

Should the capital receipt from the sale of library sites not reach current estimates there will be a shortfall in the investment necessary to achieve the full modernisation plan. If this occurs the service would have to prioritise the remaining funds available and seek alternative sources to support the remaining programme.

The Audit Commission, in raising the standard for CPA (**CPA – the harder test**, 2005) has included performance indicators, not only for achieving the national public library standards but also for cost per library visit and for active library borrowers as a percentage of the population. Walsall Libraries must take steps to ensure these targets can be met by increasing membership, reducing costs and increasing efficiency. The achievement of these targets is crucial to maintaining and improving the current 2 star status of the Culture block and the Council's overall score.

If no action is taken, the service will not improve the choice of reading available to users, the elderly and decrepit buildings will become more difficult and expensive to maintain (with a consequent impact on the health and safety of users and staff alike) and the service will be forced into unplanned closures (as happened at Shelfield). With the existing staffing structure, libraries are unable to increase opening hours and are unable to run additional reading groups and homework clubs. Many books and computers will continue to be tied up in buildings not open when the public wish to use them. This would not provide an excellent service, nor address the CPA requirement for continuous improvement

There is a major risk, if modernisation does not take place that the Library Service will lose its relevance to the local community with a resulting fall in satisfaction levels, numbers of active users and thus leading to poor performance against CPA Performance Indicators. Currently only 21.7% of the population are members of the Library and it is vital that this and other indicators for use and satisfaction are raised through the modernisation plans.

Equality implications

The Library Modernisation Plan will ensure that libraries offer the widest possible access to services for all sections of the community regardless of disability, race, gender, social or ethnic background. All priorities and targets are designed to be fully inclusive and will form a key strand of the Lifelong Learning Equality Action Plan.

Consultation

Walsall residents' survey and focus groups -MORI, December 2003
CIPFA PLUS User Surveys - Adults (October 2003), Electronic users (October 2004), Children (October 2005)
Staff survey (August 2004)
Staff Forum (ongoing)
Walsall residents survey on modernisation (September 2005)

Vision 2008

Proposed library developments will contribute to council priorities:

- 1 ensure a clean and green borough
- 4 make our schools great
- 6 encourage everyone to feel proud of Walsall
- 7 make it easier to access local services
- 9 listen to what local people want
- 10 transform Walsall into an excellent authority

Background papers

Report to Scrutiny, 15th April 2004, **Key messages from Walsall Libraries' public consultation**

Report to Cabinet, 11th November 2004, **Public Library Position Statement 2004**

Report to Cabinet 22nd December 2004 **Principles for Excellence in the Library Service**

Report to Community Organisations, Leisure and Culture Scrutiny and Performance Panel, 27TH January 2005, **Laying the foundations for an excellent library service**

Report to Cabinet, 23rd March 2005, **Principles into Practice: The Library Service Review Improvement Plan**

Report to Cabinet, 8 February 2006, **Development Opportunities in Bentley Centre**

Report to Cabinet, 8 February 2006, **Relocation of Forest Gate Library and Sale of Existing Site.**

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Signed:



Executive Director: J. Morris

Date: 21 February 2006

Signed:



Portfolio Holder: Councillor G. Perry

Date: 21 February 2006