

Council – 25 February 2016

Petitions – Save Beechdale and Pleck Libraries

1.0 Summary

1.1 This report is in response to two petitions opposing the closures of Beechdale and Pleck libraries respectively as part of budget proposals concerning the Library Service for 2016/17.

1.2 The first petition, “Petition against the proposed closure of Beechdale Library”, was presented to Council on 11 January 2016 by Councillor Jukes. The petition contains 1622 signatures and is worded as follows:

“Beechdale Library is situated in the heart of Beechdale and is used by many community groups; they run a mother and toddlers group on a Wednesday as well as job clubs, computer clubs and any other groups that wish to use the library at any time. Over the last 12 months these groups have doubled the numbers of those who use the library. If this well run library shuts it could force the closure of the Beechdale Lifelong Learning Centre and see the heart ripped out of Beechdale, one of the most deprived areas of Walsall. We, the signatories call on Walsall Council to re-consider the decision to close Beechdale Library”

1.3 The second petition, “Save Pleck Library”, contains in excess of around 3,000 signatures and was presented to Council on 11 January 2016 by Councillor Anson. In addition to the adult petition, a petition from local children and letters from local schoolchildren is also included. The petition is worded as follows:

1.4 *“We the undersigned, completely reject the conclusions of the draft proposal public consultation which has identified for potential closure seven of the Walsall’s libraries. We believe libraries are an important part of the communities they serve and perform a much wider social function than the simple lending of books. The opportunities this Council service has provided to previous and present generations are almost immeasurable. The local library also continues to give access to a world of knowledge and experience for many disadvantaged people in our city. Something they would otherwise be denied. Accordingly, we call upon the Mayor to give a categorical assurance that he will not support any move to reduce library provision and will work with officers and users to keep all threatened branch libraries open.”*

1.6 A similar petition has been received concerning another library, but does not contain the required number of signatures for consideration by Council.

1.7 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 the content of the petitions be noted and consideration be given to the contents before the finalisation of budget proposals for 2016/17.

3.0 Background Information

- 3.1. As part of the draft budget for 2016/17 there is a proposal to save £487,912 from library services which, if approved, would mean the closure of seven libraries from the current network of sixteen. This proposal includes the closure of both Beechdale and Pleck libraries.
- 3.2 Consultation on the budget proposals for the library service took place between 29 October 2015 and 4 January 2016 using the following methods:-
- a) Service specific questionnaires (online and hard copy): one for adults and one for children
 - b) Exit interviews conducted at every library
 - c) Face to face drop-in sessions held at all libraries proposed for closure (two sessions in each library, one during the week and one on a Saturday),
 - d) Evening focus groups held at each library proposed for closure. The Pleck Focus Group on 8 December was attended by around fifty people
 - e) Discussions and comments sought from groups that use libraries proposed for closure as meeting places
 - f) Letters sent to all local schools and to organisations and groups supporting disabled people. The letters asked them to promote the consultation and contain an offer to meet with Members if requested

- g) A similar letter sent to local community organisations seeking to assess their interest in a partnership to provide community book exchange facilities in the local area

3.4 Consultation on the budget proposal for the Library Service closed on 4 January 2016. Feedback from the consultation was reported to Cabinet in January and Cabinet considered this information when finalising its budget proposals. By the consultation closing date, 1,905 people had responded to the adult questionnaire, 490 had responded to the questionnaire for children and young people whilst a further 435 face to face interviews had taken place.

Beechdale

4.1 At Beechdale, 66 (3.6%) of the returned questionnaires came from people who use Beechdale Library and all used the library regularly. Of Beechdale respondents:-

- 36.7% Would use Bloxwich Library if Beechdale closed
- 21.7% Would not use any other library
- 55.4% Walked to the library
- 40.7% Had no access to a car
- 89.2% Borrow books from the adult section
- 36.9% Borrow children's books
- 55.4% Use the computers

All respondents thought the library was very, or fairly, important to them as individuals and to the community as a whole. 73% of respondents were female and 26.1% considered themselves to be disabled.

4.2 At Beechdale, 56 people took part in face to face exit interviews, drop-in sessions and a focus group at the Library. 30% of these people were over 60 years and 4 were known to have a disability. There were some expressions of concern regarding cuts to the children's centre and youth service and the impact of the potential closure of the library on Beechdale centre and its services. The local nursery would lose its twice weekly visit. 25% of people mentioned the social importance of libraries and a similar number mentioned the loss of activities for children and support for homework and literacy.

Comments included:-

"This library is local, it suits our needs, it builds up confidence"

"These changes will affect demographic conditions. This area is underprivileged"

"My children love reading if Beechdale closed I would not be able to take them to another library so they would have to do without which is a shame as they are passionate about reading"

"I have mobility problems and don't drive so the library is essential in me being able to get out of the house"

"People with pushchairs, 2 children or more, how they will be able to get to Bloxwich. 2 miles is a long walk for some people with kids or disabilities. Many people won't go out far in the dark."

"I have two grandchildren and we come in 2 to 3 times a week to use the computers, printers and do homework, We would be in a mess if we did not have this library and the school does not provide anything. Homework would suffer"

Pleck

- 5.1 At Pleck, 126 (6.6%) of the returned questionnaires came from people who use Pleck Library and all were regular users of the library service. Of Pleck respondents:-

- 25.3% Would use Central Library if Pleck closed
- 20.0% Would use Darlaston if Pleck closed
- 13.3% Would not use any other library
- 65.5% Walked to the library
- 46.7% Had no access to a car
- 72.7% Borrow books from the adult section
- 50.0% Borrow children's books
- 60.2% Use the computers

All but two of the respondents thought the library was very, or fairly, important to them as individuals and to the community as a whole. 71.4% of respondents were female and 16.1% considered themselves to be disabled

- 5.2 At Pleck, 108 people took part in face to face exit interviews, drop-in sessions and a focus group at the Library – the highest number to attend these sessions in any library. 25% of these people were over 60 years and 19 were known to have a disability. 39.8 % were Asian and 26.8% White British. The people spoken to expressed strong feelings that the library should not be closed and that it played a key role in the community. A demonstration against the proposed closure took place outside the library on Saturday, 9 January, which was attended by around 100 people.

Comments included:-

"We have a mosque, temple, etc but there is nowhere else that brings together the whole of the community"

“The Job Centre requires me to do 26 hours per week doing job searches on the computers. I know more people who do the same. I can’t do 26 hours if I have to walk into Walsall. They would stop my benefit and I can’t live on fresh air. Closing Pleck would put more pressure on the computers at Walsall.”

“This is a genuine community hub”

“My grandchild comes to the playgroup. Take it away from them and how are they going to learn and build relationships?”

“There are cultural boundaries that stop people moving out of the area. It’s important for Asian ladies to be local.”

“The bottom line is that you are attacking the most vulnerable in the community. If you attack places like this you get no response. It should all be about promoting in the community, not just as a library service but part of the councils responsibilities to its community”

“Closing my local library will make my community poorer in a way that nobody has envisioned. It was a big mistake to reduce the opening days of Pleck library to 3 days and it’s an even bigger one to close it.”

- 5.3 A group of residents from the Pleck area, the Friends of Pleck Library, submitted their own report regarding the proposed closure of the Library. This document put forward two alternative proposals to achieve savings in libraries, these being to: a). to close the larger libraries for lunch, and b). to close libraries on an additional day each week. These alternative options have been fully evaluated and a report has been submitted to Cabinet for consideration with the feedback from the consultation.

Background papers

Libraries’ consultation feedback

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