


FORM S & PP 3

 Walsall Council	REPORT OF THE SOCIAL CARE AND HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	DATE: 10th March 2017
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TITLE OF THE MATTER CALLED-IN: Corporate Budget Plan and Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2017/18. Savings reference 32 – Redesign of Library Service.

DATE CONSIDERED BY CABINET: 8th February 2017

CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDER: Councillor J. Fitzpatrick

DATE OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MEETING: 27th February 2017

Grounds under which the matter was called in for scrutiny:

The cessation of a library service on sites: Beechdale, Blakenall, New Invention, Pelsall, Pleck, Pheasey, Rushall, South Walsall, and Walsall Wood from 30th June 2017 will adversely affect the health and well-being of Walsall residents. There is a concern that consultation with minority groups, in particular the disabled, was not sufficient to ensure that their views were represented.

Record here the Overview and Scrutiny Committee conclusions and proposals:

Members were informed that the consultation was undertaken to inform decisions concerning the redesign of the library service. The nine week consultation period (27 October to 31 December 2016 inclusive) had sought to understand people's use of the affected services and their preferred option for the service within a reduced budget. The Committee were advised that the consultation on libraries was designed and conducted in line with the Gunning Principles. This set out the legal expectations of what constitutes robust and appropriate consultation with an emphasis on fairness. 'The Consultation Institute', a not for profit best practice organisation, provided advice and oversight to the consultation process to support its robustness.

Officers described the consultation methods used and that over 1700 people had responded to the consultation on libraries. It was explained that this was sufficient to warrant meaningful analysis and interpretation. The Committee challenged how disabled groups had been consulted and were provided with an explanation that this group of people had been given every opportunity to

respond to the consultation. Responses from people were broadly representative of local communities, including disabled people. This data was then analysed to inform the Equality Impact Assessment so that the impact of the decision on different groups could be understood and mitigating actions designed.

Members discussed the consultation process and suggested that because residents had been consulted many times before on the issue of libraries, there was a danger that this had created apathy with the process which may have affected the level of response and the feedback received. Officers replied that apathy and fatigue could indeed be an issue and that a wealth of information had been gained from previous consultation on libraries which had been used as a foundation for this consultation. The different approach (the random sample postal survey) used in 2016 gave Cabinet unbiased data which was used to make a decision on the future design of the service. In previous years there had been a degree of bias where some areas of the borough had responded more than others.

The Committee enquired about a reference made in the report to a face to face meeting held with a disabled gentleman to discuss the draft budget policy proposals and record his feedback. Elected Members challenged how well supported the individual was by Officers to allow him to provide reliable feedback given the specific needs that he may have had. It was explained that significant preparation had taken place for the meeting. Three Council Officers had been present for the 1.5 hour long meeting. Elected Members were informed that the meeting sought feedback on all elements of budget consultation and stressed that although the meeting focused mainly on adult social care proposals the individual's feedback on the redesign of the library proposals was also recorded. The support of advocate to the gentleman was offered but declined. The gentleman in question had been consulted before so there was a good awareness of his needs and the most effective methods with engaging him. Elected Members noted that neither carers nor advocates were present at the face-to-face meeting. Members raised concerns that, no feedback was recorded from the disabled gentleman's wife, who is required to use a wheelchair, who accompanied her husband to the meeting. It was explained that this was because the consultation meeting was arranged in response to the specific request from the gentleman and his partner had attended half of the meeting. Concern was also expressed at the meeting that disproportionate weighting may have been allocated to the gentleman's social care focussed feedback to the consultation.

Committee Members expressed concern about the impact of library closures on the elderly who may not be able to access alternative sites due to poor mobility or poor transport links. It was suggested that the closure of local libraries, in particular in Pheasey and Pelsall, could cause social isolation for the elderly and that this would, in the future, impact upon the adult social care budget. There was a cohort of vulnerable individuals, who were not known to the Council, who were able to lead happy and fulfilling lives because of their local libraries and the additional services they hosted. It was felt that the risk of closing these libraries

could mean that this cohort of people could become isolated and vulnerable putting additional pressure on social care services. Members were keen to ensure that this had been taken into account when making the decision as the wider context was seeing further reductions in services, such as care packages, to the same group of people. The Portfolio Holder for Community, Leisure and Culture referred to the good work already carried out by Community Associations across the borough to combat social isolation.

Further to this questions were asked about costs of decommissioning library buildings and how these had been taken into account in the budget process. It was noted that Members were not provided with details of the capital or revenue decommissioning costs as part of the budget consultation proposals. Comments were made about the ongoing financial liability to the Council of Pelsall Village Centre. Members were concerned that the Council would be funding the centre on behalf of the NHS.

The Committee discussed the value of co-locating services and recalled how Pelsall Village Centre had been developed as a model of best practice between the Council (Libraries and Children's Services) and the NHS. Members felt this model was being undone and the potential benefits for the prevention agenda were being lost with potential future knock on effect to the adult social care budget and NHS.

Members also noted what appeared to be the high cost of the Library Home Delivery Service and suggested that more efficient methods of providing this service should be investigated.

With the proposed closure date of libraries being 30 June 2017 it was felt that the timescales for community groups to bid to set up community libraries was too tight. Therefore the Committee felt that if a community group presented a credible expression of interest to run a community library the council should then extend its opening for a further year to allow time for any new group to establish themselves and avoid expensive decommissioning and re-commissioning costs.

Record here the specific recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. The Committee respectfully request that Cabinet revisit the decision regarding libraries that are proposed to close to look in more detail at the costing of closure. In revisiting the decision Cabinet should profile the decommissioning costs and in particular project the future cost pressures to the adult social care budget as a result of the decision to close said libraries.
2. The Committee request that for those libraries where a credible expression of interest is made to operate a community led library, prior to the 30th June 2017 deadline; remain open for a further year.

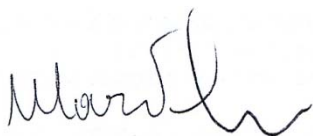
Explain here how the proposals/recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee differ from those of Cabinet:

The Committee has requested that Cabinet revisit their decision to re-examine the associated costs of closing libraries including any potential impacts on adult social care to ensure that the decision will not have an unexpected knock on impact on the future finances of the Council.

The Committee have also asked that the decision to cease to provide library services at the libraries proposed to close is extended beyond the current proposed date for a further year for those libraries where community groups have expressed an interest and presented a credible plan to take over the management of a library.

This form provides an accurate record of the meeting of the above named Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Signature: **Date:** 7th March 2017.....