

**12 February 2015**

**Petition: Beechdale – against the closure of the lifelong learning centre on Stephenson Square.**

**Ward(s)**      Birchills Leamore

**Portfolios:**    Councillor K Hussain, Community, Leisure and Culture  
                         Councillor B Cassidy, Children's Services and Education

**Executive Summary:**

A petition has been received regarding the cumulative impact of proposed budget savings on the lifelong learning centre on Stephenson Square, Beechdale. The proposed savings refer to youth activities, reductions in council funding to the community association and the closure of Beechdale Library. This report provides a response to the petition.

The petition refers to:

- Budget Proposal 31 – Changes to the delivery of youth work
- Budget Proposal 51 – Reduced funding to community associations
- Budget Proposal 65 - Reduce the library network

It is worded as follows:

*The lifelong learning centre is used by many from the very young to the elderly and houses not only the Library, but Frank F Community Association and Beeches Day Nursery. The lifelong learning centre is the Hub of Beechdale and its community, the library is well used by old and young, with friendly staff that are always there to help, the Community Association offer a well organised youth provision by excellent staff, they also offer training courses for adults to aid themselves go back into work and lunch clubs for the elderly as well as leasing out for dance clubs, martial arts and meetings. We the undersigned would like Walsall Council to look again at this proposal and not close the doors on the heart of Beechdale Estate.*

It should be noted that, since the receipt of the petition some of the budget proposals have been amended:

- The proposed reduction in grants to community associations has been withdrawn and support will continue to be provided.
- The closure of libraries has been deferred to allow the feasibility of options for other ways to provide local access to books to be fully investigated.

### **Reason for Scrutiny:**

A petition has been received, with over 500 signatures, which requires it to be presented to the relevant Scrutiny and Performance Panel and for a response to be given by either the Chief Executive, Executive Directors, Assistant Directors or Heads of Service. The Portfolio Holder may also be required to attend.

### **Recommendations:**

That the Panel note the response provided to the petition

### **Background Papers:**

The Petition received from residents of Beechdale Estate

### **Resource and Legal Considerations:**

If the proposed multiple budget savings are agreed, there is a possibility that some council owned buildings may no longer be used by their current occupants and would therefore become the full responsibility of the Council who would resume responsibility for maintenance of the buildings.

All legal and procurement procedures will be followed in relation to any related contract/commissioning variations.

### **Citizen Impact:**

With regards to the proposed building management savings, there may be some impact in terms of the building opening hours and maintenance.

With regards to the proposed youth support services and library savings, see the equality impact assessments for these proposals and the Equality Implications section of this report for further details.

The closure of a local library will impact primarily on those people who are unable to travel to an alternative service point. The nearest alternative library for Beechdale residents is Bloxwich library which is 1.5 miles from current library site. An alternative to this will be offered by more frequent visits by the mobile library service

The cumulative impact of the three budget proposals could negatively impact the viability of the centre

**Environmental Impact:**

If the centre closed it would have a negative impact on Stephenson Square and potentially affect the business of local retail premises.

**Performance Management:**

None.

**Equality Implications:**

An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out.

For the budget proposal ref 51 - community development proposed saving: this will impact each organisation. Current feedback from Community Associations is that they will attempt to manage the saving, although this will require additional 'goodwill' from staff and volunteers so there is potential for some impact to the community.

For budget proposal ref 31 - 'changes to delivery of Youth Work': it is anticipated that there will be some 'possible adverse impact' related to the potential loss of support and activities for young people including those with disabilities, young women at risk of teenage pregnancy and a potentially disproportionate impact on black, minority ethnic young people. There may also be an adverse impact on measures to reduce anti-social behaviour. An action plan is in place to mitigate any adverse impact, which includes the intention to undertake a 'root and branch' review of the Youth Support Service Targeted Youth Work offer including:

- What we deliver, where, for how long, at what cost and with what impact
- How we ensure the appropriate focusing of resources on the areas and young people of greatest need

For budget proposal ref 65 – reduction of the library network: it is anticipated there will be some negative impact related to the potential closure of Beechdale Library particularly for children and their parents, young people, the elderly and disabled, unemployed people and those who find it difficult to travel to another library service point. The Library Service will mitigate for this impact by more frequent visits to the area by the mobile library service, the continued development of online services (including eBook downloads) and offering home visits to people who are housebound and their carers. Library Services will work with schools and other organisations to give children access to books and have investigated opportunities to provide local "book exchange" facilities based either in a community building or in the old library, managed by the community.

**Consultation:**

A wide range of consultations have taken place with young people as regards the targeted youth work proposals including a young people budget conference held on

6th November. A range of focus groups (including attendance by the Head of Youth Support Service) and meetings with young people, the Council leader and Children's Services Cabinet Member. Over 3,000 young people contributed to the 1st stage of the corporate budget consultation process.

Discussion also took place with all commissioned providers who were given an opportunity to comment on the proposed reductions

Consultation on the library service budget proposals has taken place via the following methods:

- a) a generic survey (online and hard copy)
- b) generic drop-in sessions at libraries and other public buildings
- c) a service specific survey (online and hard copy)
- d) advertised drop-in sessions have been held in each of the libraries named in the proposal where senior Library Service managers could meet local people, answer their questions and gather their views.
- e) face-to-face consultation interviews with customers in every library and also street interviews to gather the views of non service users.
- f) letters have been sent to all local schools and to organisations and groups supporting people with protected characteristics.
- g) a similar letter has been sent to local community organisations seeking to assess their interest in a partnership to provide community book exchange facilities in the local area.

For the community association proposed saving, a focus group was held on 20 November 2014, with the community association centre managers invited to put forward their comments. A separate meeting was held with the Frank F Harrison's Community Association's Principal Officer as the officer responsible for finance and building management, on 26 November 2014 to discuss any potential impact.

**Contact Officers:**

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