

Cabinet – 23 October 2019

District Libraries & Streetly Community Library - Cessation of Sunday opening

Portfolio: Community, Leisure and Culture (Councillor Perry, Portfolio Holder)

Related portfolios: Not applicable

Service: 21st Century Information & Skills

Wards: All

Key decision: Yes

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

- 1.1. To save £40k towards the already agreed 2019-20 revenue budget saving of £107k.

2. Summary

- 2.1. Sunday opening commenced at the five District Libraries (Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall) and Streetly Community Library in January 2018, utilising existing staffing over an extra day of the week, in part to compensate for the year-long closure of the town centre's Lichfield Street Central Library for restoration works.
- 2.2. Take-up of the service on Sundays has been lower than expected, with an average of 58 visits per library on a Sunday compared to 269 on other days, and 190 book issues on a Sunday compared to 715.
- 2.3. Sunday opening requires a full salary enhancement of 5% for all staff who work on the Sunday rota. This currently costs £40k per annum and ceasing Sunday working would contribute towards the revenue budget savings already agreed by Members for the 2019/20 financial year.
- 2.4. In February 2019 Cabinet approved a £107k budget saving (£143k in a full year) from the District libraries and Streetly, in addition to a further £150k from the service's book-purchasing, subscriptions and ICT budgets, and an additional £10k per annum income target.
- 2.5. Closing on Sundays would not result in any staff reductions. Instead, staff hours would be reallocated across the week to enhance library opening hours.

- 2.6. The Lichfield Street Hub would be unaffected and would continue to offer a full seven-day service – one of only three Black Country libraries to do so.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Cabinet is now asked to agree to the cessation of Sunday opening at the five District libraries (Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall) and at Streetly Community Library, in order to contribute £40k per annum to the agreed revenue budget savings, to take effect from Sunday 5 January 2020.

4. Know

- 4.1. In 2017 the Library Service re-design reduced the number of Walsall libraries from sixteen to seven, and the annual net cost of the service from £4.3m to £2.5m. It resulted in a leaner, more responsive and more innovative 21st Century Information & Skills service.
- 4.2. The Council's statutory library service now comprises the Lichfield Street Hub, five District Libraries (Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall) plus Streetly Community Library, as well as the Mobile Library and the Home Delivery Service. The School Library Support Service closed in March 2018 due to reduced demand from the Borough's schools.
- 4.3. The service-wide re-design included additional funding:-
- £4.6m to re-design, renovate and redecorate the Lichfield Street "Hub" and integrate the Local History Centre & Archive into the same building;
 - £100k to replace the Library Management System (LMS) that runs the book acquisition, catalogue and issue/discharge element of the service; and
 - £397k to install an Access Control System into the district libraries and Streetly so that the buildings could be used by the public but out-of-hours and, in future, unstaffed" by the Library Service.
- 4.4. As part of the service-redesign proposals, Cabinet had noted that whilst an Access Control System in the District Libraries would primarily enable sites to be open for extended unstaffed periods, it could also present an option for reducing staffing levels in future years. To enable Cabinet to consider all options to meet a balanced budget in 2019/20 the reduced staffing option was tabled for the draft 2019/20 budget, on the grounds and assumption that an Access Control System would eventually be installed during 2019.
- 4.5. Despite the success of the "Hub" and LMS projects, there were implementation difficulties with the Access Control System that were not possible to overcome, and as a consequence implementation ceased in November 2018. Continuing efforts were made during 2019 to facilitate a solution for the implementation difficulties, this proved not to be possible and was concluded in August. There are presently no other viable

examples of such an integrated system that could be adopted by the Council.

- 4.6. The agreed 2019/20 budget still requires a budget reduction of £143k in a full year (£107k in 2019/20 and a further £36k in 2020/21). This is no longer achievable from the original proposals due to the non-installation of the Access Control System and other saving options have now had to be considered.
- 4.7. One of the options is to close the six libraries on Sundays throughout the year as this will contribute £40k per annum by not having to pay staff the 5% Sunday-working enhancement.
- 4.8. Sunday opening commenced at the five District Libraries (Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall) and Streetly Community Library in January 2018, utilising the existing staff over the extra day of the week, as part of the innovative remit of the re-designed service. This made Walsall the only library in the region with all its libraries open on Sundays.
- 4.9. As part of the 2017 Library Service redesign the Council decided to trial opening for three hours (1pm-4pm) on Sundays for the first time. The Districts and Streetly opened on Sunday from January 2018 to coincide with the closure of the Lichfield Street Central Library in Walsall for the year-long restoration work. The Lichfield Street "Hub", Local History centre & Archive re-opened in January 2019 and offers a seven day a week service.
- 4.10. After eighteen months of the District Libraries and Streetly being open on Sundays, the data for visits to, and book issues from, these libraries on a Sunday is generally disappointing and show a much lower demand for the service than on other days. There are an average of 58 visits per library on a Sunday compared to 269 on other days, and 190 book issues on a Sunday compared to 715.
- 4.11. Even allowing for Sunday opening hours being less than on other days of the week the visitor numbers and issue figures are low. It is considered that the additional annual expenditure of the £40k 5% Sunday working allowance on top of the staffing costs themselves represents poor value for money.
- 4.12. This is not the best use of limited council resources, nor does it demonstrate best value; and suggests there is limited customer demand for Sunday opening. The decision to reallocate the three hours from a Sunday to other days in the week is considered to be an operational decision in-line with the aspirations of the Council's Proud transformation programme. The on-going seven-day operation of the town centre Lichfield Street "Hub" will continue.
- 4.13. Sundays are also often problematic in terms of staff availability leading to more regular use of agency staff on Sundays than on other days of the week to keep the sites open.

- 4.14. The reallocation of the three hours from Sundays to alternative days are likely to reflect the local needs and demands in each district. Staff hours would be re-allocated across the week so as to enhance library opening hours and enable access at times more suited to local community needs. This could include earlier opening to benefit jobseekers and people en-route to work, similar to the Lichfield Street Hub.
- 4.15. Sunday opening does remain relatively unusual for library authorities, especially for non-Central libraries. Of the nine libraries open on Sundays in the Black Country, seven of these are currently Walsall libraries. There is no Sunday opening at all in Sandwell or Wolverhampton.
- 4.16. In comparison, the Lichfield Street Hub opens 59 hours per week –18% more than any other library in the Black Country, making it one of only three libraries in the Black Country to open seven days per week. It provides 11.5 hours of weekend opening, compared with an average of 6.5 across other Black Country central libraries. Hub opening will remain unchanged as part of any change to opening hours at the District Libraries.

Risk management

- 4.17. Managers will ensure that ceasing of Sunday opening is communicated to customers and stakeholders well in advance and the Council's Corporate Consultation Officer will be involved in any consultation process.
- 4.18. By reviewing opening hours as a whole and enhancing hours to reflect observed customer requirements, it is important that this should be seen as a positive change. Numbers of visits and items issued will continue to be monitored to ensure that opening hours reflect the needs of the communities served.

Financial implications

- 4.19. The 2019/20 revenue budget agreed by Council includes a revenue saving of £143k in a full year (£107k in 2019/20 and a further £36k in 2020/21) by reducing the number of staff at the five District Libraries and Streetly. This is no longer possible due to the non-installation of the Access Control System and other saving options have had to be considered. Managing staff vacancies, deletion of a management post and operational efficiencies will help achieve the overall saving.
- 4.20. An additional revenue saving of £160,000 per annum has already been implemented in 2019/20 by reducing the book purchasing (£50k), subscriptions (£50k) and ICT budgets (£50k) and an additional income target of £10k. This saving has been implemented in full.

Legal implications

- 4.21. A challenge to the Council's decision to close on Sundays may be possible through a Judicial Review.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.22. There are no procurement implications directly relating to this report.

Property implications

- 4.23. There are no property implications directly relating to this report.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.24. There are no health and wellbeing implications relating directly to this report, though the wellbeing benefits of libraries may be enhanced by having libraries open at optimum times for when people are more likely to use them.

Staffing implications

- 4.25. Staff who currently work on Sundays in the libraries concerned will no longer be eligible for a 5% salary enhancement. Full consultation will be undertaken with employees and with trade union representatives.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.26. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been undertaken relating to the proposals in this report.

Consultation

- 4.27. The decision to cease Sunday opening is an operational change in response to lower than expected customer demand on Sundays, clearly demonstrated in visitor figures and borrowing statistics. As the hours will be reallocated across alternative days of the week there is no reduction in the overall level of service. Customers will be informed of Sunday closures well in advance.

5. Decide

- 5.1. Cabinet is now asked to agree that the five District libraries (Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston & Willenhall) and Streetly Community Library should cease opening on Sundays.

6. Respond

- 6.1. Following approval of this report:
- The proposals will be communicated to all staff of 21st Century Information & Skills and to their union representatives.
 - New timetabling will be developed to ensure optimum opening hours at all library sites concerned.

- Customers will be notified that the withdrawal of Sunday opening will commence on Sunday 5 January 2020.

7. Review

- 7.1. Daily visitor numbers and items borrowed per day at each of the five district libraries and Streetly Community Library will continue to be monitored on a monthly basis. New thermal visitor counters to be purchased will enable more detailed analysis of visits per time of day and will enable the service to be more responsive in adapting library opening hours as required to reflect changing patterns of customer use.

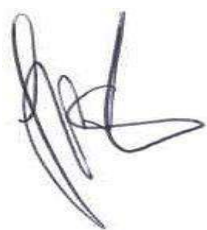
Background papers

None

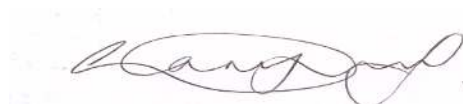
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