

Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

22 October 2015

A sustainable Library Service for the future

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor A Harris – Community, Leisure and Culture Portfolio

Executive Summary:

As available resources decline the Library Service is facing significant challenges to identify ways to ensure it remains relevant to people's needs and to make it sustainable and accessible in the future. The closure of any library will impact on those least able to travel to their next nearest service point – children, older people and those with a disability.

A number of options have been investigated including: reduced opening hours, the closure of smaller libraries to leave a core service from libraries located in the major district centres of the Borough, community partnerships, greater use of volunteers, use of new technologies and shared services. Circumstances are different for each library and it seems that a combination of the options above may offer the most effective way forward.

Reason for scrutiny:

The Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27th July 2015 requested a report on what actions had been taken to create a sustainable library service over the next five years. This report gives details of the options which have been investigated.

Recommendations:

That the Panel note the content of the report

Background papers:

None

Resource and legal considerations:

The Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires the local authority to provide a library service that is both comprehensive and efficient and freely accessible to anyone who wishes to make use of it.

Annual Budget for Libraries	
Category	Total
Employees	3,062,368
Income	(92,232)
Premises - <i>including cleaning, caretaking and refuse</i>	485,503
Other - <i>including transport, supplies and services print and design</i>	865,359
Grand Total	4,320,998

The 2015/16 controllable revenue budget for the Library Service is £4,320,998. (The costs and performance of individual libraries are shown in Appendix 1) The Service has been subject to year on year budget reductions in the past which have achieved savings without significant impact on the service to customers. Since 2011/12, the Library Services has reduced its operational budget by £543,000.

- 2011/12: £180,000 (staffing restructure)
- 2012/13: £67,000 (efficiencies through introduction of self service)
- 2013/14: £110,000 (efficiencies through introduction of new technologies)
- 2014/15: £93,000 (restructure with loss of management and supervisory posts, implemented October 2014 – full year effect in 2015/16 a further £93,000)

Having reduced the supporting infrastructure by this level, further significant savings can only be made through a reduction in staff and/or buildings which account for 80% of the controllable budget and the reconfiguration of the library network using different models of service delivery.

Proposals affecting libraries were part of the draft budget for 2015/16. There proposed the closure of 8 libraries over 2 years – Beechdale, Pheasey, South Walsall, Streetly and Walsall Wood in Year 1 to save £385,092 and Blakenall, New Invention and Rushall libraries in Year 2 saving £180,630. This was a total saving of £565,722 from revenue budgets. This proposal was removed from the budget by Council in February 2015.

Similar options are under consideration for the budget proposals 2016/17.

Citizen impact:

Analysis of the 2011 census information by ward has highlighted areas where there is high unemployment (Blakenall, Beechdale and Birchills/Leamore), high levels of reported “limiting illness” (Bloxwich East, Blakenall and Darlaston South) and where there are large populations of older people (Aldridge South, Streetly and Pelsall) or young children (South Walsall, Palfrey and Blakenall). These are all groups for whom easy access to a library service can have a positive benefit for learning and education, improving employability and in quality of life.

Consultation undertaken as part of the budget proposals for 2015/16 highlighted that the major impact of any library closure will be on those who would be unable to travel to an alternative service point: parents with young children, children; unemployed, elderly and disabled. A high proportion of library users (55%) walk to the library indicating that the local availability of the service is important to customers.

96% of respondents were library members, with 58% stating they use libraries at least once a week or more. 81% used the service to borrow adult books, 38% used the computers 41% borrowed children’s books and 31% used the library for information.

When asked what respondents use library computers for, most (66%) said general interest followed by research (65%), work/study (38%), job search/application (31%), keeping in touch with relatives / friends (23%), other (4%).

In terms of overall importance libraries have to respondents and their households, 99% said that libraries were important.

Environmental impact:

If libraries are proposed for closure, efforts will be made to interest the local community in providing “Book Exchange” facilities, either from the old library building or from another local community venue. Where library buildings remain unused, they will be offered for disposal by the Council. It is appreciated that any building left unused for a period of time may attract anti-social behaviour.

Performance management:

The library service is available to everyone who lives, works, studies in or visits Walsall. It currently receives around 1.1 million visits per year. 68.3% of visits are made to the 6 largest libraries in the network which have the longest opening hours (43 hours each, per week)

There are currently 50,600 active users of the service (that is people who have used a library in the past 12 months) Of these 16,856 are aged from 0 to 12 years; 3,194, between 13 and 18, 22,083 are adults between 19 and 59 and 8,467 are aged 60+.

Many library users visit more than one library and the library they visit most regularly is not necessarily that at which they joined or the nearest to where they live. For this reason it is difficult to use the membership file to identify where people live in relation to the libraries they use.

Analysis of the budget consultation survey 2015/16 indicated that 42% would travel further to use a library, 22% would use alternatives to libraries and 19% would use the mobile library service. 37% of respondents said they would stop using libraries if their local branch closed. This indicates that the numbers of visits to libraries and subsequently their performance would decline.

Equality Implications:

An Equality Impact Assessment was carried out for the budget proposals 2015/16 with regard to the equality impact of the potential closure of up to 8 libraries. It identified that the closure of a local library will impact primarily on those people who are unable to travel to an alternative service point, particularly on children and their parents, young people, unemployed people, the elderly and disabled. Some mitigation for this impact could be by more frequent visits to the area by the mobile library service, as long this service is still available; the continued development of online services (including e-book and audio downloads) and offering home visits to people who are housebound and their carers. Library Services are working with schools and other organisations to give children access to books and are continuing to discuss the potential to provide local “book exchange” facilities with community organisations.

Consultation:

It is vital that significant, meaningful consultation is undertaken before any firm proposals for the re-provision of the Library Service can be finalised. Consultation should be undertaken as soon as possible to ensure that people have a reasonable amount of time to consider the options, assess their impact on their lives and provide a considered response. If challenged through Judicial Review, the Council would need to demonstrate that it had fully consulted with those people affected while proposals were in a formative stage, that the results of the consultation had been fully considered and that proposals were reviewed in the light of the response.

Consultation was undertaken as part of the budget proposals for 2015/16. This included questionnaires (online and in hard copy), focus groups, public meetings at the libraries named in the proposals. This consultation identified that the groups most likely to suffer detrimental impact from any reduction of the library network were parents with young children, children; the unemployed, elderly and disabled who may have difficulty travelling to another service point.

Those consulted were predominantly against any proposal to close libraries and clearly valued having a local library, but saw it as a community asset and a hub for social interaction as much as a place to borrow books; a place to socialise and take part in activities, particularly those for young children. Many felt that the loss of the local library would mean that they would not have ready access to another library,

which suggests that people were not keen to travel very far to receive the service; preferring to walk to a library. They also felt that the closure of a library would have a particularly detrimental impact for the younger generation. They mentioned the loss of computer access. For some the worry was the impact on older people and the health benefit and well-being they gain from the service. Many respondents spoke of how libraries are used across the generations i.e. grandparents, parents, children/grandchildren.

Many have pointed out that the schools in the areas where libraries closed would no longer be able to visit the library and that children will be unable to use the resources for homework and other informal learning activities. Job seekers also felt that they would no longer have access to information and facilities to help in their job searches. They also cited the library as the hub of the local community, offering a place to meet other people and to socialise young children at the cradle and mother and toddler groups.

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1. Report

The current library service in Walsall

Walsall Library Services operate through a network of 16 libraries across the Borough. There is also a Mobile Library service which provides access to library services in areas without a local branch library. Mobile 1 is the urban mobile which makes 46 stops around the Borough every week; Mobile 2 visits sheltered housing, day centres and residential homes. There is also a housebound service which delivers books and other media to people who, through ill health, disability, or as carers, are unable to leave their homes to visit the library.

The provision of a library service is regulated by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. Under this act, library authorities are required to provide a service that is “comprehensive and efficient” and freely accessible by everyone who wishes to make use of it. It must lend books and other printed material free of charge and offer stock that is sufficient in number, range and quality to meet the general and special needs of adults and children in the area.

Walsall Libraries currently receive around 1.1 million visits per year of which 68.3% are made to the 6 district town centre libraries of Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston, Willenhall and Walsall Central. This leaves 31.7 % visiting the remaining 10 libraries.

A number of options have been considered on how the service can be provided within the requirements of the 1964 Act, but re-provisioned in such a way to provide access to people who wish to use the service regardless of where they live. Consultation undertaken as part of the budget proposals for 2015/16 highlighted that the major impact of any library closure will be on those who would be unable to travel to an alternative service point: parents with young children, children; the unemployed, elderly and disabled.

Rationalisation of the existing library network

80% of the controllable budget for the Library Service is spent on staff and buildings. For this reason, in seeking to achieve any significant reduction in revenue budgets, consideration must be given to how and where the service is delivered. The map at **Appendix 3** shows the location of each library in the current network within a 2 mile radius. The map serves to show the considerable overlap of current library areas, particularly in the centre and north west of the Borough, where some rationalisation of the number of libraries would still offer a library service point within the 2 mile radius. 2 miles was considered by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to be a reasonable distance to expect people to travel to access the service and was one of the Public Library Standards up to 2008.

Community run “Book Exchanges”

The Library Service has already approached community organisations across the Borough to assess their interest in providing community “book exchanges”, either from the site of the old library or from their own premises. These facilities would provide access to books for loan to local residents who would have difficulty accessing another library service point, but would not be considered part of the core Library Service.

To support the development of these facilities a draft basic offer (see **Appendix 2**) has been prepared to inform interested organisations of the level of support they could expect whilst they established their service and to facilitate negotiations. This offer would include a start up package giving 12 months support whilst an ongoing funding stream to replenish stock and cover costs and utilities was established. The value of this offer would equate to approximately £10,000 in the first year. The offer would **NOT** include:

- Ongoing financial support or funding other than an amount to purchase stock
- Frontline staffing contracted to Walsall Council
- Replacement computers
- Access to the Library Management System.

Expressions of interest in this offer have been received from several organisations and further discussions have identified particular potential for partnership working with Manor Farm Community Association, Frank F Harrison Community Association, Walsall Black Sisters and Streetly Community Association and Streetly Academy. Interest in this option increased after the announcement of possible library closures as part of the budget 2015/16. A pilot of this model of delivery opened in Bentley in September, where Old Hall People’s Partnership have established a “Community Library”, run by their staff and volunteers and supported by the Library Service.

Libraries as part of a local partnership network giving access to services

Libraries potentially have a key part to play in the development of local partnership networks providing information, advice and guidance and access to services within local areas. Libraries’ core business is finding and giving accurate, up to date information; library staff are trained in enquiry techniques and in giving advice and guidance; libraries are recognised as safe, neutral spaces where anyone can go to find any piece of information they need. This role will make libraries a key link in any local network as a local access point and information provider. By using libraries as a base for the local delivery of other services or for staff from other agencies, library staffing levels could be reduced or the role of staff could be enhanced with training to offer efficiencies in other service areas across the Council.

A Single Black Country Library Service

The feasibility of creating a single, shared library service for the whole of the Black Country was assessed in 2011/12 as part of the shared service work for the Association of Black Country Authorities. The assessment looked at the practicality of combining the four separate library services of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton into a single, shared service, creating savings through efficiencies and a single management and support structure. This was one of a number of strands undertaken at the time. The work ceased in July 2012 as support for the project was withdrawn by Sandwell and Wolverhampton. Since then the four authorities have worked towards greater library service collaboration including the joint procurement of stock and a Library Management System which have resulted in some cost reductions.

Many of the financial benefits of a shared service have diminished over the past 5 years as a result of the savings listed in Resource and legal considerations section.

A reduction in library opening hours

Smaller libraries are currently open only 3 or 4 days per week (between 21 and 23 hours). It is considered that further reductions would make them ultimately unviable and would have a detrimental impact on access if applied to larger libraries. Closing the larger libraries an extra day would affect the visiting patterns of those customers who provide 75.4% of the annual visits to libraries. However, existing patterns of opening could be revised to open later on some days and close correspondingly later in the evening. This would not offer savings, but would improve the availability of the service after school and work.

Invest to save – Open +

Open+ is a system which enables access to library buildings and basic facilities without the need to have library staff on site. It works with the existing library management system and will automatically control self-service kiosks, public access computers, security, lighting etc. It has the potential to extend library opening hours and save on revenue budgets by only having staff available at times that have been identified as the busiest.

The implementation of Open+ would require a capital investment to procure and install the system and the security systems it would require. Library members would be asked to opt in to the scheme and to agree to an acceptable use policy before they could be issued with a PIN number to give them access.

The system is currently in use at Leeds and in Peterborough. Peterborough libraries are now accessible 123 more hours than previously. The system is currently under more detailed investigation.

Outsourcing/trust

As yet this option has not been considered in any detail. The savings it offers would be in terms of business rates and central support charges (although these would simply be transferred to other Council services and so would not represent real savings to the Council overall). Libraries would struggle to survive on their own as the opportunities to bring in income are minimal as the basic service must be free. The Council would also remain responsible for ensuring a Service that continued to meet the requirements of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.

Risk Management

Any proposals to remodel or re-provision the Library Service may be open to challenge and judicial review under the provision of the Public Libraries Act 1964. Over the past 4 years, Judicial Reviews into proposed library closures and remodelling have found against the council in Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire and Somerset. Brent Council successfully defended a Judicial Review because of the significant and thorough public consultation and Equality Impact Assessment they had undertaken.

As demonstrated above, extensive consultation would need to be carried out before any firm proposals were formulated and again before a decision was made. Proposals would have to contain robust mitigation to enable the service to be accessible to those groups identified as being detrimentally affected and people with protected characteristics.

Conclusion

The future shape and effectiveness of the Library Service will need to reflect the challenges of the ongoing economic climate balanced against the needs of Walsall's local communities for information; formal and informal learning opportunities; support for education, literacy and numeracy; reading for pleasure, relaxation and as a local space for social activity. The options detailed in this report are to open discussion and to seek guidance on which options should be further pursued.

Appendix 1

Library	Visits 2014/15	Issues 2014/15	Computer sessions 2014/15	Cost
Aldridge	71,768	72,117	12,070	164,092
Beechdale	22,902	14,716	3,132	40,363
Blakenall	25,711	14,790	6,160	56,172
Bloxwich	87,726	71,872	21,431	161,588
Brownhills	78,800	49,790	9,481	164,092
Central	343,111	193,502	99,454	418,733
Darlaston	85,825	49,963	26,796	190,943
New Invention	28,422	21,060	3,222	56,172
Pelsall	75,955	52,874	10,176	81,530
Pheasey	31,086	34,528	5,660	67,963
Pleck	33,729	23,537	6,266	38,179
Rushall	16,381	10,040	2,212	42,953
South Walsall	14,480	26,817	3,000	38,179
Streetly	50,712	52,808	3,620	57,306
Walsall Wood	15,328	21,155	2,427	42,953

Willenhall	68,331	54,161	20,085	161,588
Mobile Library Services	25,195	89,139		85,314
Mobile 1 (Urban)				89,060
Mobile 2				83,120
Housebound				
Totals	1,075,462	852,869	235,192	2,040,300

Costs for some libraries vary from those for libraries of a similar size, because of the nature of the building costs. For example: costs for Blakenall Library are higher than those of Pleck because of the leasing and service charges levied by the property owner (New Horizons).

Equally, Beechdale Library's costs reflect the need to provide security on site during opening hours.

APPENDIX 2

Offer to Community Groups

Offer to communities where a library has closed

- Reconfigured mobile library service to areas of deprivation and those most remote from a library, with longer stops for maximum access.
- Housebound criteria reviewed accommodate more people with mobility problems.
- Offer to community organisations who express an interest in maintaining a book loan facility
- Book loan facilities in community buildings (e.g. Oak Park Leisure Centre)
- Outreach reader development activities such as reading groups aimed at appropriate target groups (children, adults, mother and toddlers, ethnic groups.) in partnership buildings.

Community Facility Start-up Offer

The offer would include:

- Start up package to community group facilities to give 12 months support while they establish an ongoing funding stream to replenish stock and cover utilities.
- Building would be provided at no cost with utilities provided for the first year.
- Initial stock of books, shelving and some furniture.
- Library staff to provide training, support to recruit volunteers, ongoing advice and guidance for the first 12 months, including health and safety, data protection and equality awareness.
- Main library service accessible via online internet connection for information, enquiries and catalogue searches.

The offer would NOT include:

- Ongoing financial support or funding
- Frontline staffing contracted to Walsall Council
- Computers
- Access to the Library Management System.
- Provision of self-service kiosks or facilities

- Ongoing support after the first 12 months unless purchased

Cost per facility:

- £10,000 including staff time and £5,000 to purchase new stock in the first year.
- This would reduce the anticipated savings

