

12 February 2015

Petitions: Save Blakenall and Walsall Wood Libraries.

Ward(s) Blakenall, Bloxwich East, Aldridge North and Walsall Wood

Portfolios: Councillor K Hussain, Community, Leisure and Culture

Executive Summary:

Two petitions were submitted to Council at its meeting on 12 January 2015 opposing the closures of Walsall Wood library in 2015/16 and Blakenall library in 2016/17 as part of budget proposals concerning the Library Service.

The first petition, "Save Blakenall Library", submitted by Councillor S Fitzpatrick, has over 500 signatures and is worded as follows:

Walsall Council plan to close eight libraries in Walsall in a bid to save more than £500,000. The Council plan to shut Beechdale, Pheasey, South Walsall, Streetly and Walsall Wood libraries in 2015/16 followed by BLAKENALL, New Invention and Rushall in 2016/17. It will reduce the Library Service from sixteen libraries down to eight. Blakenall Library is an essential part of this community and the future for our young people and must not be allowed to close We the undersigned oppose the closure of our library in Blakenall.

The second petition, "Save Walsall Wood Library", submitted by Councillor Sears, also contains over 500 signatures and is worded as follows:

Labour run Walsall Council are proposing to close Walsall Wood Library. We the undersigned call on the Labour cabinet to stop their plans to close our much valued library in Walsall Wood.

It should be noted that, since the receipt of these petitions, the budget proposals have been amended to defer the closure of any library in the first year to 1st July. This is to enable work to be undertaken to assess the feasibility of a number of alternative options and suggestions that have been put forward and for any further options to be presented and evaluated.

Reason for Scrutiny:

The petitions to save Blakenall and Walsall Wood libraries both have over 500 signatures, which requires them 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.

Recommendation:

That:

1. The Panel note the content of the petitions

Background Papers:

Cabinet report, 29 October 2014

Cabinet report, 17 December 2014

Resource and Legal Considerations:

If the proposed budget savings are agreed, some council owned buildings, such as Walsall Wood library, would no longer be used for their current purposes and would therefore become a liability to the Council while they remained empty.

Blakenall Village Centre is owned by New Horizons and the lease for Blakenall Library is due for renewal in June 2015.

Citizen Impact:

The closure of a local library will impact primarily on those people who are unable to travel to an alternative service point. For Blakenall residents, the nearest alternative library is Bloxwich library which is 1.5 miles from the current library site.

In Walsall Wood, the nearest alternative library is Aldridge, which is 1.9 miles from the current library site. An alternative will be offered by more frequent visits by the mobile library service

Environmental Impact:

Blakenall Library is part of Blakenall Village Centre which is owned by New Horizons. They have expressed concern about the future viability of the centre should the library and other council services withdraw.

Performance Management:

No implications

Equality Implications:

An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out and indicates that the closure of a local library service will have a negative impact on those who find it difficult to travel to another library, particularly for children and their parents, young people, the elderly and disabled, and unemployed people. 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:

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.

The information gathered through this consultation will inform a report to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 4 February 2015. At this meeting, Cabinet will approve the draft budget to be presented to Council at its meeting on 26 February 2015, when the final decisions on the budget proposals will be taken

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