

**Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**21 January 2016**

**Feedback on consultation regarding the budget proposals under consideration for the Library Service**

**Ward(s)**                      All

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

**Executive Summary:**

The resource allocation process for the Council's budget 2016/17 to 2019/20 has required the Library Service to identify ways to significantly reduce its revenue budget, which currently stands at £4,320,998. Since 2011/12 the Library Service has reduced its operational budget by £543,000 without impact on the front-line service, but, as 80% of the controllable budget is spent on staff and premises costs, these must be considered as part of any further budget reductions. As available resources decline the Library Service is facing significant challenges to identify ways to ensure its remains relevant to people's needs and to make it sustainable and accessible in the future. The closure of any library will impact most on those least able to travel to their next nearest service point – children, older people and those with a disability.

The proposal put forward for consideration is to close 7 libraries and cease the operation of the mobile library service. This would leave 9 libraries located in major district centres and the Housebound Library Service to deliver a core service to people across the Borough.

A number of alternative options have been investigated over the past few years, including: further reducing opening hours, the closure of smaller libraries, community partnerships, greater use of volunteers, use of new technologies and shared services.

**Reason for scrutiny:**

The Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2015 requested a report on the consultation process and the initial findings of the budget consultation concerning libraries contained in the draft resource allocation for 2016/17. This report gives details of the public consultation and initial findings.

**Recommendations:****That:**

1. The Panel note the content of the report and comment as appropriate

**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. Any proposals to remodel or re-provision the Library Service may be open to challenge and judicial review.

**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.

**Environmental impact:**

Where libraries are proposed for closure, efforts are being made to interest the local community in providing "Book Exchange" facilities, either from the old library building or from another local community venue. Firm expressions of interest have been received from Manor Farm Community Association for Rushall Library and Beacon Primary School who wish to provide a book exchange from the school in mitigation for the proposed closure of New Invention Library and Friendship Care and Housing for Beechdale. A book exchange would be established at the new Oak Park Active Living Centre to mitigate for the closure of Walsall Wood Library.

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.

### **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 would be 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.

An Equality Impact Assessment for the current proposals is under preparation taking into account the analysis of the consultation which finished on 4<sup>th</sup> January.

### **Consultation:**

It is vital that significant and meaningful consultation is undertaken and analysed before any firm proposals for the remodelling of the Library Service can be finalised. Key messages from the current consultation are in the body of this report below.

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### 1. Report

#### **Feedback from the Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 25 November 2015.**

The Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered budget proposals for libraries at its meeting on 25 November 2015. Members questioned the Portfolio Holder (Community, Leisure and Culture) and the Head of Libraries, Heritage and Arts at length. The Committee made a recommendation to Cabinet that the methodology for selecting which libraries should close should be centred on educational attainment, achievement, life chances and deprivation of the areas in which the libraries were based. Members also recommended that capacity building should take place in the third sector to create a volunteer base to assist the long term sustainability of the library service. An extract from the draft minutes of the meeting is attached at Appendix 1 to this report

#### **Cabinet**

At its meeting on 16 December 2015, Cabinet received the following recommendations of all Overview and Scrutiny Committees regarding the proposed budget for 2016-17.

- 1. That this Overview and Scrutiny Committee urges Cabinet to rethink and change its methodology for library closures and base their decision on educational attainment, achievement, life chances and deprivation. Further to this capacity should be created in the third sector to develop a volunteer base to improve the long term sustainability of the library service.*
- 2. (1) That Cabinet note the feedback from overview and scrutiny committees and the update on feedback to date from public/stakeholder consultation as*

*set out in this report, and consider this feedback in preparation for final budget recommendations in February.*

At the meeting Cabinet noted the feedback received and agreed to consider the feedback in the preparation of the final draft budget recommendations in February.

### **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.

### **Consultation**

Extensive consultation was carried out from 29<sup>th</sup> October 2015 to 4<sup>th</sup> January 2016 and was widely publicised via the press, social media and posters and had the following methodology:

- 7000 printed questionnaires distributed across the library service.
- Online questionnaire: one for adults and one for children, this was widely publicised in the press, the library website and external newsletters.
- Letters and a copy of the questionnaire were sent to all schools, residential homes, community associations and groups representing disabled people inviting comments to be sent to the Head of Service.
- Exit interviews were conducted at all libraries by library managers, asking members of the public what impact proposed library closures would have on them, their family and community. Members of the public were also invited to mark on a map where they lived and what Walsall libraries they used or would use.
- Discussions and comments sought from groups that use libraries proposed for closure, for example book clubs, cradle groups. The discussions included investigating the impact of the proposed closure on the group and individual members.

- Face to face drop-in sessions were held at all libraries proposed for closure to enable members of the public to comment further on the proposals to a senior library manager. There were 2 sessions in each library, one during the week and one on a Saturday.
- Evening focus groups were held at each library proposed for closure. This was a more structured dialogue with a group of members of the public discussing the impact of the proposed closure to them and the community and looking at other options for savings.
- A shorter questionnaire was produced for children and young people, the results of which are analysed separately.

### **Feedback from consultation**

Between 29 October 2015 and 4 January 2016 consultation on this draft proposal was conducted which included a questionnaire available to complete from all libraries which was also available online. Library users and non users were encouraged to respond. A shorter questionnaire was produced for children and young people aged under 16, the results of which have been analysed separately.

By the closing date, 1,905 people had responded to the adult questionnaire, 470 had responded to the questionnaire for children and young people and 435 face to face interviews had taken place.

### **Key findings**

- Library use amongst respondents is high, with 97% being 'active users'.
- Responses were received from users of all libraries within the Walsall network, the largest responses coming from users of the mobile library, central library and the home library service. A third of responses came from users of libraries proposed for closure.
- Borrowing adult books and using the computers were the most common reasons for using the library, followed by finding information and borrowing children's books.
- Over two fifths of users of all static libraries have used the computers in the last 12 months with computer usage being highest amongst users of Pleck, Darlaston, Beechdale and Pelsall libraries where over half of active users used the computers.

- The main reasons for using computers are general interest and research. Use for work / study and job research is also common and is highest amongst users of libraries proposed for closure.
- Most respondents travel to the library on foot (48%). 38% use the car and 12% use public transport. The proportion of respondents walking to the library is greatest amongst users of libraries proposed for closure reflecting their local catchment. Of active users who walk to libraries that are proposed for closure, 50% do not have access to a car.
- When asked what they would do if they could not use the library they use most often, from a range of options including all current libraries, most users of static libraries proposed for closure identify another static library they would use. However, most users of the mobile library service say that if they could not use it they would not use any other library service.
- When faced with closure, whilst over two fifths of static library users say that they would travel further to another library, a similar proportion also say they would stop using libraries altogether, perhaps reflecting an unwillingness to adapt to change when faced with closure.
- Libraries are seen as important for a wide variety of reasons including being a 'lifeline' to older people and providing a service that meets a range of social and educational needs of young and old. Libraries are seen as key in supporting the education of children.
- The free resources available at libraries is see as valuable, in particular for those who read a lot of books and those who do not have a computer or access to the internet at home.
- The close proximity of libraries and the ease of access of the mobile library make accessing the library particularly convenient for families and those with mobility issues who otherwise would not be able to access the service.
- In terms of impact local libraries are convenient to use and closure causes inconvenience, so that people would have to travel further and this would make using libraries inconvenient and more expensive, including harder to access; resulting in potentially going less often. In addition there would be the loss of local community asset and socialising opportunities, facilities that people have become accustomed to being available.

## **Conclusion**

Analysis of the consultation indicates that people value to convenience of a local library and many would have difficulty travelling to another service point, expressing concerns about the costs of travelling on public transport or parking; difficulty carrying heavy books and parents stressed the difficulties of taking young children some distance, particularly by public transport, with limited time and books to carry. There was particular concern about children having no longer having access to books and information, support for homework and being able to visit the library with their school.

Older library users say that losing their local library and notably losing the mobile library service would have a big impact, with loss of social contact, feeling of isolation, something they look forward to having a visit to their accommodation, being housebound and not having the ability to find alternative arrangements.

Many refer to the library being the 'hub' of the community or the a focal point of an area, and that not having a library would be a major loss to the community, especially in areas where people feel there is not much else on offer.

Comments reflect the strong feeling that libraries provide a vital social meeting place for the whole community, one that offers a safe and welcoming environment where people can meet others and find out what is going on in the local community.

Full analysis of the results of the consultation will be considered by cabinet before any decision on the budget proposals is made.



## **Note of libraries budget proposal discussions at previous Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings**

The Committee discussed budget proposals for the library service at its meeting on 25 November 2015. Below are extracts from the minutes where the budget proposals were discussed.

### **44/15 BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR THE LIBRARY SERVICE 2016/17**

*Further to Minute number 34/15 the Committee revisited the issue of libraries in the borough. Members noted that the proposed budget for 2016/17 contained proposals to close seven libraries. The Committee debated the report and asked a series of questions of the Portfolio Holder.*

*The Portfolio Holder (Community, leisure and culture) explained that it was proposed to close Beechdale, Blakenall, New Invention, Pleck, Rushall, South Walsall and Walsall Wood Libraries. Walsall Wood Library would be replaced by a book exchange service at the refurbished Oak Park Leisure Centre. Two mobile libraries would also cease operation. He added that the Library Service had a budget of £4.3m. 80% of this was staff and building costs. £500,000 had previously been saved without impacting on the frontline. 83% of library visits were made to the libraries being maintained. Even with the proposed closures there would still be a library within 2 miles of every household in the borough. The housebound library service would be retained. He added that volunteers would be required to come forward to maintain the current library network in the long term.*

*Members recognised the value of introducing further volunteers into libraries to sustain the service but registered concern that insufficient work was taking place to build capacity in local communities. Members also felt that people in deprived communities were less likely to volunteer to assist in libraries which further compounded the problems that could be caused by the proposals. The Committee emphasised the importance of building capacity in the third sector and supporting community groups to access external funding.*

*The idea of replacing libraries with book exchanges was viewed from two sides. On one hand the value of retaining some kind of library service was welcomed but on the other it was recognised that a book exchange was not an adequate replacement for a library.*

*A Member commented that the library closure in Beechdale would create a problem for the long term sustainability of the Beechdale Lifelong Learning Centre.*

*The Committee expressed concern that the libraries proposed for closure were in the most deprived areas of the borough. There were concerns that this could further reduce the long term prospects of these communities. The*

*committee was informed that the libraries proposed for closure were selected as they were the least visited libraries. On reflection the committee felt that the methodology for selecting libraries for closure should be altered. It was recommended to Cabinet that the criteria for library closures be altered to take into account educational attainment, achievement, life chances and deprivation indices.*

*A Member asked a question about e-books and the potential for library loans to take place through an app. It was explained that e-books and e-audio loans were already possible through home computers. However, it needed to be noted that many publishers did not allow e-book loans.*

*A Member suggested that greater collaboration with the private sector should take place in order to improve the sustainability of libraries. For example, those libraries with large premises, such as Darlaston, could share space with a coffee shop franchise. The Portfolio Holder thought the idea was excellent and said he would investigate it further.*

**Resolved:**

***That Cabinet rethink and change its methodology for library closures and base their decision on educational attainment, achievement, life chances and deprivation. Further to this capacity should be created in the third sector to develop a volunteer base to improve the long term sustainability of the library service.***

**45/15 RESOURCE ALLOCATION 2016/17 TO 2019/20: DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET FOR CONSULTATION – COMMUNITY LEISURE AND CULTURE PORTFOLIO**

*The Committee considered the draft revenue budget for the Community, Leisure and Culture Portfolio.*

*The Portfolio Holder (Community, Leisure and Culture) presented his draft revenue budget to the Committee with the support of officers. A summary of comments on those savings where questions and concerns were raised is set out below:*

*Saving reference 7: Consider closure of 7 libraries across the borough and mobile library service (Policy)*

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