

Community Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel

15 October 2009

Agenda
Item No. 7

Impact of the Library Modernisation Plan

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor B. Sanders – Leisure and Culture

Summary of report:

This report is to inform Scrutiny of the impact and outcomes of the Library Modernisation Plan. This three year programme ran between April 2006 and March 2009 aiming to transform the Library Service and remodel or refurbish its network of branch libraries. Consultation in 2004, with both library users and non users, found that overall satisfaction with the library service was good (71% of Walsall residents were satisfied with the library service). However, most perceived library buildings to be out-dated, old-fashioned, uncomfortable and often small and cramped. The library décor was felt to be dull and uninspiring and sometimes in a run-down condition. Libraries were felt to be particularly lacking in comfortable chairs and seating areas that would encourage users to spend time there.

The Library Modernisation Plan was formulated to address these issues, to make libraries attractive and welcoming places to visit and to enable the development of services to appropriate to the changing social, economic and technological background.

Background papers:

Report to Scrutiny, 15th April 2004, **Key messages from Walsall Libraries' public consultation**

Report to Cabinet, 11th November 2004, **Public Library Position Statement 2004**

Report to Cabinet 22nd December 2004 **Principles for Excellence in the Library Service**

Report to Community Organisations, Leisure and Culture Scrutiny and Performance Panel, 27th January 2005, **Laying the foundations for an excellent library service**

Report to Cabinet, 23rd March 2005, **Principles into Practice: The Library Service Review Improvement Plan**

Report to Cabinet, 8th February 2006, **Development Opportunities in Bentley Centre**

Report to Cabinet, 8th February 2006, **Relocation of Forest Gate Library and Sale of Existing Site.**

Report to Cabinet, 1st March 2006, **The Modernisation of the Library Service**

Reason for scrutiny:

The 3 year, Library Modernisation Plan was completed at the end of March 2009. There is now the opportunity to assess the outcomes of the programme and

evaluate how far it has achieved its aim of improving and transforming the physical aspect of library buildings and paving the way to modernise the delivery of library services and improve the ability of the service to engage with local people.

Performance and feedback from customers indicate that the Plan has encouraged new and increased use of local libraries, most changes have been popular although some, like the counter at Streetly have had to be revised in the light of customer reaction.

Resource and legal considerations:

The Plan was approved by Cabinet in March 2006 who agreed that, on this occasion, funding for the programme would be found from capital receipt received from the sale of those library sites released by the relocation of 5 branch libraries: Brownhills, Coalpool, Forest Gate, Shelfield and Walsall Wood.

Initially, indicative costs were estimated at around £1,005,000 with a potential capital receipt of around £920,000. After the first year, it became obvious that more detailed work was required on some buildings and Property Services completed more detailed estimates, both in terms of the costs of building work and amount of work necessary to bring buildings up to an adequate standard. For example substantial work was required at the old Neighbourhood offices at Coppice Road to strengthen the floor to support shelves of books.

In January 2008, a report was approved by Cabinet to increase the capital limit for the project to £1,100,000. Estimated capital receipt had also increased to £1,511,000 meaning the plan was still affordable.

Citizen impact:

The Library Modernisation Plan aimed to deliver a modern, effective and efficient library service focussed on the needs of the individual customer and offering an excellent customer experience.

It was recognised that many libraries in the borough occupied aging, dull and, in many cases dilapidated buildings which were off-putting and did nothing to promote the level of activity and innovation libraries could offer the local community.

The impact of the modernisation work to improve access, make the libraries attractive and easy to use and to create flexible public space is demonstrated in the increase in use after the transformation work was completed. For example:

Brownhills – relocated to the Park View Centre in June 2006

- Visits in the 12 months before relocation: 59,094
- Visits in the 12 months after relocation: 103,353
- This is an increase of 75% in 12 months continuing to 61% in year 2

- Membership in the 12 months before relocation: 380
- Membership in the 12 months after relocation: 1272

- This is an increase of 892 which represents 235%

Walsall Wood – relocated to neighbourhood office premises in Coppice Road on December 2007

- Visits increased by 30% in the 12 months after relocation
- Membership increased by 134.5% the 12 months after relocation

New Invention – relocated to vacated shop premises in The Square, New Invention in October 2007.

- Visits increased by 30% in 12 months the 12 months after relocation
- Membership increased by 134.5% the 12 months after relocation

Aldridge – remodelled in May 2008

- Visits increased by 15.8% since September 2008 after remodelling
- Membership increased by 134.5% the 12 months after relocation

Meaningful comparisons are not yet available from other libraries and will be skewed by the closure of Mondays which commenced in April 2009 shortly after their completion.

Environmental impact:

The Library Modernisation Plan moved some existing libraries to better accommodation in shared or vacated sites. Where libraries remained in their existing, old buildings, significant improvements were made to improve the appearance of the building, both inside and out, and to increase their energy efficiency wherever possible.

The Bloxwich Library transformation, which will be delivered through Big Lottery funding, will deliver outcomes to ensure that energy consumption is reduced to meet or exceed Carbon Trust guidelines

Performance management:

A Library Modernisation Planning Board was set up to monitor the progress of the programme and to ensure the timely involvement of all services connected with its delivery. The Board comprised representatives from Property Services, Finance, Customer Services, ICT and Library Services and was chaired by the Assistant Director of Leisure, Culture and Lifelong Learning.

Equality Implications:

The Library Modernisation Plan formed the framework for the development and delivery of a modern, customer focussed service. Libraries aimed to operate at the heart of local communities, sustaining community life, supporting education, learning, regeneration and the national strategies for children, young people and families.

Building improvements included automatic doors to ease access; toilet and refreshment facilities; comfortable seating areas; bright, fun children's areas and small counters to create more open public spaces.

In addition to the physical improvement of the library network, the Modernisation Plan aimed to tailor services and opening hours to the needs of their local communities. Severe pressures on staff and budgets have meant that this aim has not been achieved.

Consultation:

Walsall residents' survey and focus groups -MORI, December 2003
CIPFA PLUS User Surveys - Adults (October 2003), Electronic users (October 2004), Children (October 2005)
Staff survey (August 2004)
Staff Forum (ongoing)
Walsall residents survey on modernisation (September 2005)
Library Modernisation Board comprising members from Building Design, Finance, Customer Services, ICT Services and Libraries and Heritage (ongoing)
Ward councillors (ongoing)

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1. Report

The need for the modernisation of the Library Service was identified in December 2003, when Walsall Libraries commissioned MORI to conduct a survey of Walsall residents to discover their views on the library service. Key messages were that libraries had too few of the right books, communicated poorly with existing and potential customers, buildings and facilities were shabby and opening hours were inconvenient.

Consequently, in 2004 Walsall Libraries embarked on a major review intended to enable the service to modernise and achieve excellence by 2008. The review analysed in detail the performance and cost effectiveness of the service, comparing the service in Walsall with that in other local authorities and consulting extensively with staff and customers.

To address the issues highlighted by the review and provide the framework for the development of a modern, locally based and customer focussed service - a programme of building improvements was proposed to take place over a three year period from April 2006 to March 2009.

The proposal was approved by Cabinet in March 2006. It was also agreed that, on this occasion, funding for the programme would be ring fenced from capital receipt received through the sale of those library sites released by the relocation of 5 branch libraries: Brownhills, Coalpool, Forest Gate and Walsall Wood and the closure of Sheffield, which had been vandalised and seriously damaged by fire.

The Library Modernisation Plan's stated aims were to:

- improve the condition of its buildings and ensure they remain safe and attractive for staff and users
- significantly improve the facilities for users
- provide more new books more quickly
- open longer hours
- devote more staff time to provide high quality customer service

The major impact of the 3 year plan has been the delivery of huge improvements to the quality of library buildings, their internal facilities and their welcoming atmosphere. Brownhills, Walsall Wood and New Invention libraries have been opened in new premises. Aldridge, Pleck, Rushall and Streetly have been completely remodelled and refurbished. Beechdale, Darlaston, Pheasey, South Walsall and Willenhall have received extensive refurbishment. Finally, Bentley and Pelsall are both subject to plans for a new building.

Refurbishment has provided new facilities such as public toilets and coffee machines, which have been flagged as desirable in customer satisfaction surveys. There has also been additional spending on book stock for the refurbished libraries to improve choice and offer a wider selection for customers.

The existence of the Library Modernisation was a key factor in enabling Bloxwich Library to secure £1.2 million from the Big Lottery Community Libraries Fund to transform its facilities, including the theatre area, into a vibrant and flexible community facility.

In an effort to improve the opportunity for people to use the library, Aldridge, Darlaston, Bloxwich and Willenhall now open on the day in the midweek when they have traditionally been closed in the past. However, the loss on Monday opening across the library network meant that the aim to introduce wider opening hours which were tailored to the needs of specific local communities has not been achieved.

A staffing restructure took place in April 2009 and some new development posts were created to enable more outreach work and to increase the capacity for the service to engage with local communities. This local engagement would promote the library service and ensure that future developments were based on identified local community needs.

Since the start of the Modernisation Plan:

2 libraries have been relocated to new buildings:

- The aging and dilapidated **Coalpool** Library has been relocated to the New Deal Blakenall Village Centre and become Blakenall Library.

- **Brownhills Library**, which was small and cramped has moved into the new Park View Centre to shared accommodation with a health centre and community group.

2 libraries have been relocated to existing, but better accommodation:

- **Forest Gate Library** moved into accommodation in The Square, New Invention and is now known as New Invention Library
- **Walsall Wood** moved from a very poor, prefabricated building to modern, brick-built accommodation on the corner of Coppice Road previously used as a neighbourhood office.

3 libraries have been significantly remodelled:

- **Aldridge**
- **Pleck**
- **Streetly**

All have had internal walls removed to create better space, toilet and refreshment facilities have been added, automatic doors fitted and the interior spaces redesigned.

6 libraries have received extensive refurbishment:

- **Beechdale**
- **Darlaston**
- **Pheasey**
- **Rushall**
- **South Walsall**
- **Willenhall**

Refurbishments included better shelving and equipment, redecoration.

Bloxwich Library has received a £1.2 million grant from the Big Lottery which will transform the interior of the library and theatre areas to create a vibrant, flexible and inclusive facility for learning and culture at the heart of Bloxwich. It will see the creation of a genuine community space which will reflect and respond to the needs of local people, challenge the low aspirations and perceived lack of opportunity inherent in the local community, offer new experiences and a chance to shape individual life chances and deliver community cohesion and empowerment.

Pelsall Library – planning is underway to create a new health centre, children’s centre and library for residents of Pelsall in partnership with NHS Walsall and Children’s Services. The building is scheduled for completion in late 2011.

As with any project of this size, not everything has gone smoothly or been entirely successful.

- It took far longer than initially expected, to identify the individual requirements of each library and how the project would be rolled out with Property Services. The formation of The Library Modernisation Planning Board enabled a lot of these problems to be ironed out. This group was made up of senior representatives from Libraries, Property Services, Finance, ICT, Customer Services and was chaired by the Assistant Director, Leisure, Culture and Lifelong Learning. This group ensured that all partners were fully informed as work progressed and that issues were discussed and resolved at a strategic level.

- The financial climate has meant that the level of capital receipt anticipated from the sale of land released by the relocation of some libraries has not yet been realised.
- Unforeseen problems meant that some remodelling work cost far more than originally expected leaving less funding for the redecoration of libraries at the end of the scheme. For example: Walsall Wood's floor required extensive work to strengthen it to hold shelving, although it was initially thought to be sufficiently robust.
- The replacement for **Bentley Library** has been severely delayed due to the failure to raise the required capital receipt during the recession.
- Failure to improve access due to the closure of all libraries on Mondays as part of required budget reductions.

The physical modernisation of the library network is only one part of a wider plan to develop libraries in Walsall to meet the challenges of developing technologies, social and economic change, the demand for new skills and instant information. A fundamental staffing restructure implemented in April 2009 has laid a framework for future services and developments to keep pace with change and meet the demands of new and existing customers. Online services have been developed to enable remote access to the library and its resources, but the Services must be constantly aware of and able to respond to, new developments and technologies such as E-Books, downloading, WiFi, etc.

In spite of the above, the Library Modernisation Plan has achieved its stated aim to improve the condition of the borough's library network. It has delivered:

- Modern welcoming buildings providing safe environments for staff and customers.
- Community spaces which can be accessed by all sections of the community.
- Modern, computer-based services, supported by 24 hour online access to many services.
- Staff who have the capacity to identify and respond to the needs of local communities in a difficult economic climate.
- Higher satisfaction levels among customers.

There is no doubt that the existence of the Plan played a strong part in the success of the bid to the Big Lottery to transform Bloxwich Library by demonstrating the commitment of the authority to delivering improvement.

Roy Clare, the Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) has praised the scheme and as a result it is highlighted as an example of best practice on the MLA website. This has led to a number of enquiries from other authorities such as Bury and Coventry and its inclusion in such regeneration publications such as the Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal.

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