

Council – 10 April 2017

Library Petition Keep Pelsall Library Open

1.0 Summary

1.1 This report is in response to a petition opposing the decision to close Pelsall Library as part of budget concerning the Library Service for 2017/18.

1.2 The petition, “Keep Pelsall Library Open”, was handed into the council on Thursday 23 February 2017 by Councillor Garry Perry. The hard copy petition of 1,230 signatures, together with an on-line petition of a further 1,785 signatures, brings the number of signatures to approximately 3,015 and is worded as follows:

“Keep Pelsall Library Open – work with the community to deliver sustainable and improved access, widening participation so that the library is community led.”

1.3 The Council’s petition scheme provides that:-

If a petition contains at least 1,500 signatures it will be debated at a meeting of the Council. This means that the issues raised in the petition will be discussed at a meeting to which all Councillors can attend and speak. The Council will endeavour to consider the petition at its next meeting although on some occasions this may not be possible and consideration will then take place at the following meeting. The petition organiser will be given 5 minutes to present the petition at the meeting and the petition will then be discussed by Councillors for a maximum of 15 minutes. The Council will decide how to respond to the petition at this meeting.

They may decide to take the action that the petition requests; not to take the action requested for reasons put forward in the debate, or to ask for further information. Where the issue is one where the Cabinet are required to make the final decision the Council will decide to make recommendations to the Cabinet. The petition organiser will receive written confirmation of this decision and this will be published on our website.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 That the content of the petition be noted and consideration be given to the contents.

3.0 Background Information

3.1 Members will recall having received a detailed report in relation to its decision on 8 February 2017 regarding the redesign of library services. Should

Members of Cabinet wish to receive a further copy of the same this can be made available upon request and in any event access to the budget report as presented on 8 February is available on the Council Management Information System (CMIS) and can be found here: [Budget report – 8 February](#)

- 3.2 Budget saving reference 32 of the Corporate Budget Plan and Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2017/18 was to redesign the Borough's statutory library service.
- 3.3 Following extensive consultation between 27 October and 31 December 2016 and following the Gunning Principles for robust consultation, Cabinet agreed a new library service at its meeting of Wednesday 8 February 2017. The service is to consist of a town centre library (Walsall), five district libraries (Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston and Willenhall), a community library at Streetly, augmented by volunteers, one mobile library and a home delivery service. This would represent the borough's statutory library service.
- 3.4 In addition, the Local History Centre & Archive service would move to the Central Library building in Lichfield Street, Walsall. The Walsall Leather Museum will remain at its current Wisemore venue, reflecting the significant economic heritage. Officers will also seek out new commercial opportunities to maximise income.
- 3.5 Nine other sites (Beechdale, Blakenall, New Invention, Pelsall, Pleck, Pheasey, Rushall, South Walsall and Walsall Wood) would cease to be a part of the library service with effect from Friday 30 June 2017. These sites would be offered to the community to consider running as local book exchanges or community venues.
- 3.6 Invitations for community groups and organisations to submit Expressions of Interest to the council's "In-tend" Procurement system have already been widely circulated from Friday 24 February. The deadline for initial submissions was to have been Friday 24 March 2017 and Full Business Plans would then be invited from credible groups, to be submitted by Friday 26 May 2017.
- 3.7 There were two Scrutiny meetings in February 2017 to consider Cabinet's decision of Wednesday 8 February on the redesigned Library Service, these being: Corporate & Public Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 21 February whilst the Social Care and Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee met on Monday 27 February. The second meeting was a "call in". As a result, the timetable for the bidding process slipped by two weeks to avoid pre-determining the outcome. Consequently, the information on each of the nine sites was released onto the Procurement's "In-tend" system week commencing Monday 13 March 2017. The deadline for Expressions of Interest is Wednesday 12 April 2017.
- 3.8 It is important to note that libraries are just one part of the network of services that residents access. Feedback has consistently found that it is often the social contribution that these buildings offer, as well as library services and to actually to borrow books, that is important to residents. It is difficult to align the

argument that closing libraries will have a direct (or even indirect) impact on adult social care costs, Walsall has a significant number of other venues within the borough, including a network of community associations and other voluntary sector bodies, many of which the council already provides funding to. These other bodies could run the activities that are displaced from the libraries without having to deliver them from the same premises.

- 3.9 The council is about to review its relationship and funding arrangements with the voluntary and community sector. It is worth noting that Cabinet decided to continue with its funding of £247,900 to community associations; having taking the voluntary sector's contribution to the community into account.
- 3.10 The council is also to fund "One Walsall", the organisation formerly called Walsall Voluntary Action with £169k a year for three years, a total of £507k. Their work, delivered through nine staff, will be to work with the voluntary sector to enable them to play a greater role, in particular in the area of health and well-being. Along with a further £150k each from the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Visionary Improvements Enhancing Walsall (VIEW), this equates to a total of £807k into this work stream.
- 3.11 Walsall Council is working on a range of initiatives to support local communities, for example the council is working with partners and the voluntary and community sector to develop a Healthy Resilient Communities project. This project is intended to address loneliness and social isolation amongst older people by helping them to remain well connected within their communities, and helping communities to become more health literate. This is in-line with Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) priorities.
- 3.12 The review of the Community Associations is also in keeping with the Government's "Vision for Adult Social Care: Capable Communities and Active Citizens" where prevention is the first of seven principles. It is widely accepted that there are benefits to the individual and to the nation in preventing illness and dependency. There is also research that low-intensity support can have direct and tangible benefits, particularly in helping service users to approach life in a more positive way. However, as Walsall's libraries do not currently operate in this way, the closure of the nine libraries cannot be argued to have an adverse impact on older people.
- 3.13 Organisations that are successful at this stage will be invited to submit a full application / business plan by the end of May / early June 2017, thereby giving community groups three months in which to develop proposals. These will not be for a Community Library (the only one of this name will be Streetly Community Library) and such facilities would be called "book exchanges". This prerequisite is expected to be written into the lease. Alternative uses for each building will be taken into consideration.
- 3.14 Only if the assessment panel consider that the five year business plan is credible and viable will a recommendation be made to Cabinet that a lease for a "book exchange" or other community use be awarded. No further funding to the site will be available beyond Friday 30 June 2017 and for the avoidance of

any doubt, the budget to support the statutory Library Service in those buildings will cease on 30 June 2017 to meet the budget saving commitments.

- 3.15 In most cases, a short period of non-occupancy after that date will not be an issue and the council has allowed for some element of closure costs until new arrangements have been put in place. For the standalone libraries, there may be greater benefits to be had from disposal to earn a capital receipt and/or allow sites to be developed for affordable housing.
- 3.16 The petition to *“work with the community to deliver sustainable and improved access, widening participation so that the library is community led”* is precisely the type of locally led initiative that Cabinet is hoping to facilitate through the redesign of the statutory Library Service and it is possible that the local Community Association may wish to play an active role in the future of the Village Centre.
- 3.17 Cabinet have taken into account all the information available to it and, as shown by the borough map in Appendix A, agreed to a redesigned Library Service that has almost all parts of the borough within two miles of a static library provision. Utilising the Mobile Library, the Home Library Delivery Service and the installation of an access control system into the five District Libraries and Streetly Community Library, it is felt that this is a pragmatic and affordable way forward for the council to continue to deliver the Library Service.

Background papers

- 8 February 2017 Cabinet
- 21 February 2017 Corporate & Public Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee
- 23 February 2017 Full Council
- 27 February 2017 Social Care and Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee
- 10 March 2017 Special Cabinet

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Walsall Hub (Library & Local History Centre) & 5 District Centres and Leather Museum & Community Book Exchange at Streetly, Kingstanding with 2 mile buffer

Appendix A

