

CABINET

11 JULY 2017

OUTCOME OF PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSED CLOSURE OF THOMAS AVELING PUBLIC LIBRARY – ADDENDUM REPORT

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Howard Doe, Deputy Leader and Housing and Community Services

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Summary

This addendum report sets out the comments of the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee following its consideration of the outcome of consultation on 6 July 2017.

1. Background

- 1.1 Members considered a report which set out the results of the public consultation on the future of Thomas Aveling Public Library, where the Council had indicated its preferred option to close the library.
- 1.2 Cabinet would be asked to take a decision on the future of Thomas Aveling library on 11 July 2017, taking into account the comments of the Committee.
- 1.3 At the request of Members, the report also provided a brief update on certain other budget reductions agreed by Council in February 2017, i.e. proposals regarding Community Hub opening hours and the future management arrangements for Grain Library.
- 1.4 The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs explained that the fundamental difficulty with the continued provision of a library at this site was its rigid opening hours during week days (3-6pm). This was an unpopular time amongst users and prevented the wider scope of activities being provided that were found at other libraries.

1.5 The following matters were discussed by Members:

- **The consultation exercise**

A Member commented that it was disappointing that only 151 responses to the consultation were received, which was a small percentage of the total number of users of the library. Another Member highlighted that 87% of respondents wanted the current service to remain in place and made a wider point about the value of consultation and the credibility of the Council if the vast majority of respondents oppose a proposal to withdraw a service but the Council nevertheless decided to proceed.

The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs acknowledged that a high proportion of those who responded were against the closure of the library. Many users of the Thomas Aveling library also used other libraries, probably because of the longer opening hours, more extensive range of activities and events, and greater stock of books available elsewhere. The service had welcomed the views expressed during the consultation and were looking to learn from them. It had become clear that awareness of the online library service was not as great as expected and this would be promoted. The consultation had revealed that there was a willingness to use alternative offers – for example online lending and the mobile library.

- **The use of volunteers**

A Member queried why the report concluded that the use of volunteers to maintain the library was not viable yet for Grain library this was the favoured approach. Another Member commented that because the library was located on a school site the use of volunteers could be problematic. The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs advised that volunteers provided an excellent service and were mainly used for the home library service and to help with specific events at libraries. The use of volunteers at Grain library was being trialled as a way of maintaining provision as other community activities took place in the building that housed the library and if the library was to close with the withdrawal of council financial support to the building this could have a detrimental effect on community services. However, this approach was not seen to be appropriate for other locations and there was a clear need for paid, professional staff in Community Hubs given the breadth of services provided.

Another Member expressed a concern about the impact of the use of volunteers on existing staff morale and implications for their career progression. The Head of Libraries, Business Support and Community Hubs responded that staff had been generally more concerned about the possible use of volunteers as a model rather than the proposed closure of Thomas Aveling. He also said that it would be difficult to envisage volunteers delivering the range of activities, events, advice, and promoting libraries as a focus for community activity. However, with the exception of Grain library there were no plans at officer or Member level to move to a model of using volunteers in place of paid staff.

- **The use of the library by children with autism**

A Member referred to the issues raised in public meetings and correspondence and noted specifically a comment that the library welcomed autistic children. He queried whether this might mean there was a greater level of children with autism using the library than at other libraries and proposed that the answer to this point be established and reported to Cabinet on 11 July.

- **Consistency of opening hours**

A Member expressed concern at a lack of consistency in library opening hours. Since 2016 the Customer Contact desks at Community Hubs closed at 6pm. Library hours remained at 7pm which had led to customer complaints about the inconsistency. Given the very low level of customer demand at the community hubs between 6-7pm and to be consistent with the timings for community hub and library services offered on the same sites all libraries within Hubs were also now closing at 6pm. However, two branch libraries (Rainham and Wigmore) still closed at 7pm for one night per week. He commented a 6pm closing time was not helpful for commuters and queried whether 7pm would be more suitable for those libraries with higher footfall in the evening. The Assistant Director, Transformation commented that key for her was to respond to customer demand and shape the service in each library accordingly where possible rather than ensuring consistency of opening hours across all sites.

- **Data on visitors to the library**

A Member asked if there were any figures for people who visited the library just to meet others or browse newspapers etc. Members were advised that there was data for the number of books issued, event attendance, numbers using ICT and data for visits overall but not broken down by these types of visits.

- **Drop boxes**

Arising from the discussion on access to libraries by commuters, a Member asked if drop boxes could be provided so books could be returned when libraries were closed. An undertaking was given to look at this. There were issues around ensuring the boxes were not misused and it was acknowledged that whilst the technology existed so that only someone with a library card could access a drop box this option was more expensive.

- **Possible impact on the school library**

An assurance was given that the closure of the public library would have no impact on the school library which currently co-located with the public service.

- **Other Issues**

The point was made that the current library was itself a replacement for another library which closed in the area. Also, for some people who lived near the library travelling to Rochester to use the main library could be difficult.

A Member of the Committee whose ward contained the library expressed his disappointment at the loss of a service but recognised the disadvantages arising from this particular site. While he felt that in the past the Council had not done enough to promote the library, ward councillors had only received two representations about the proposed closure. Given the high number of people in residential homes in the immediate area, he welcomed the fact that older residents, care homes and residential homes would be contacted about services to increase older people's take up of the service.

1.6 The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the outcome of the consultation on the future of Thomas Aveling library;
- b) ask that further investigation take place on whether there may be a greater use of the Thomas Aveling library by children with autism compared to other libraries and that the outcome of this be reported to Cabinet on 11 July;
- c) recommend that Cabinet consider the issue of consistency of library opening hours, and customer usage patterns and demands, and;
- d) note that the provision of drop boxes at libraries will be investigated.

2. Assistant Director's comments

- 2.1 The focus on autism arose as a result of concern expressed by one parent responding to the consultation. The library service does not routinely gather information on whether users have autism, but feedback from local staff working at Thomas Aveling library and the outreach team does not indicate a disproportionately high number of children with autism using the library. Staff report one young person with autism as a regular user.
- 2.2 Cabinet is being asked to take the decision on the future provision of a public library at Thomas Aveling school. The other matters addressed by Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee are not related to that decision.
- 2.3 The library service does not offer standard opening hours across all branches – they are tailored to meet customer demand. This will be kept under review to ensure the service continues to meet customers' needs.
- 2.4 Drop boxes have been investigated in the past but those with security features activated by library cards were found to be prohibitively expensive. We will review the current market offer and potential customer demand for this service.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 The Cabinet is asked to consider the comments of the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee as set out in the addendum report.

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