

WIRRAL COUNCIL

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 MARCH 2012

SUBJECT:	LIBRARIES STRATEGY
WARD/S AFFECTED	ALL
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF FINANCE
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	COUNCILLOR LESLEY RENNIE
KEY DECISION:	NO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out the broad responses from the recent Library Strategy “Wirral Libraries, A New Chapter” consultation and highlights how they will be taken into account in the strategy.

2. BACKGROUND ISSUES

- 2.1 Cabinet on 8 December 2011 (minute 219) agreed the draft Library Strategy. This Committee received the draft Library Strategy on 30 January 2012 (minute 68) and resolved to reconsider the strategy after completion of the consultation process and when the views of all libraries and user groups had been taken into account.
- 2.2. This report provides preliminary feedback on the recent library strategy consultation for Wirral Library Service.
- 2.3. The total number of surveys this preliminary review is based on is 1,465 of which 423 were paper surveys. The total number of surveys received continues to increase.
- 2.4. Feedback was received from road shows at each library as well as library Friends organisations, user groups, and reading groups. The general public were consulted from the outset. The process has been a valuable one and our communities have come forward and demonstrated that they value their library service but also appreciate that we need to operate within tighter financial constraints.
- 2.5. In designing and running the consultation process, officers and Members sought to listen to the thoughts, views and experiences of local people and organisations on the new strategy and proposed changes to opening hours.

- 2.6. The libraries strategy consultation ran from 26 January until 29 February 2012. The consultation was designed to canvas public and partner views on the library strategy. This was done via:
- Face to face discussion conducted by library staff in all Wirral libraries.
 - Information at focus groups.
 - Online questionnaire placed on the Council website.
 - Promotion of the online survey through social media.
 - Direct email contact with 1,900 recent customers of the library service who had provided their email addresses.
 - In-house survey of customers in the newly merged sites (Eastham & Heswall) to see what they thought of the new opening hours.
 - February Area Forums
- 2.7. To assist this process:
- Hard copies of the consultation documents were made available at all libraries and many other areas within the local community to ensure that they were available to both library users and non-users. To assist Members a copy is attached as Appendix 1 of this report.
 - All the individuals, groups and organisations on the corporate marketing database (over 4,800 e-mail addresses) were notified of the consultation.
 - Media releases were sent to the local media.
 - Friends and user group members were invited to a special strategy/opening hour consultation evening during which the library management team were on hand to answer any questions and discuss some of the issues facing the library service.

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

- 2.8. These are shown below based on the following preliminary numbers:
- 385 people engaged in the face to face library survey sessions.
 - 30 people attended the library consultation evening.
 - 1,465 consultation forms were completed and returned by 29 February 2012.
- 2.9 The detailed list of responses on the draft strategy indicates three broad areas of comment:
- Respondents are overwhelmingly supportive of the value of a written strategy for the library service.
 - Respondents agreed that the strategy fits Wirral's needs.
 - Respondents are in favour of the initiative to bring together library and One Stop Shop provision.
- 2.10 To assist Members a preliminary breakdown of responses for each question is shown at Appendix 2 based on those returns received by 29 February 2012.

OPENING HOURS

- 2.11 The most significant response to the consultation in terms of public comment relates to proposed changes in opening hours although it must be made clear that responses varied from location to location.

- 2.12 The main feature in the draft proposal to redistribute hours was a plan to extend the opening of all Wirral libraries to six days a week. To help facilitate this there would be an alteration of evening opening hours across community libraries so that they would close at 5 p.m. This was supported by the evening opening of the four central library sites at Bebington, Birkenhead, Wallasey and West Kirby. The proposal was based on analysis of declining evening usage patterns over the past four years and it would be more beneficial to provide a Wednesday daytime opening service.
- 2.13 It was proposed to offer a more strategic cost-effective approach to service delivery with 24/7 access to the library via the recently introduced and increasingly popular e-book service and four central libraries offering three late night opening times per week.
- 2.14 The libraries become significantly quieter in the evening and this trend is replicated in all areas of the borough with every library showing a significant drop in book borrowing and user count from 5 p.m. onwards.
- 2.15 From analysis of written responses on the consultation forms there is great strength of feeling as regards opening hour changes in general. More than half of the respondents agreed that only the four main libraries should maintain evening opening. There was a clear contradiction as a large number of written comments on the forms also called for the maintenance of locally driven late evening opening.
- 2.16 In addition, the majority of people disagreed with evening closure in the in-house library opening hour surveys and during the Friends Consultation Evening Event. People felt strongly that some of the non-central libraries should be open in the evenings or 'for at least one evening a week' although there was no clear consensus as to which ones.
- 2.17 The issue here is that more people have asked for Libraries to retain an evening opening than actually use them. The view is that respondents although not using the evening opening themselves felt it should be there for someone else to use.

FUTURE OPTIONS

- 2.18 In order to address the issues a number of options present themselves for further consideration. These are:
- (a) Library opening hours remain as now, with sites closed on Wednesday and retain evening opening.
 - (b) Continue with the proposed opening hours, opening on a Wednesday and restricting evening openings to the four main sites.
 - (c) Change the proposed core opening hours of the non-central libraries to a later opening and closing time (e.g. moving from 9-5 to 10-6).
 - (d) Review ability to offer more flexible opening hours for each Community Library to suit the needs of local people and reflect customer demand while retaining the core opening times at the four central libraries.

- 2.19 Each of these options has advantages and disadvantages and each will be carefully considered and a subsequent report to Cabinet will be submitted with a proposed route forward.
- 2.20 Particular emphasis will be given to explaining the issues that surround the more flexible opening hour option based on local need which was favoured by many respondents. This was also one of the main suggestions for libraries from the Department for Culture Media & Sport (DCMS) Policy Statement 'The Modernisation Review of Public Libraries' (March 2010) and a number of other library authorities are known to be looking at this as it fits with the Government localism agenda by serving each community individually and reflecting the needs of those living, working and studying in the area. It would need to acknowledge resource limitations and this may require innovative ways in which to help with evening opening without increasing costs, such as supporting staff presence with volunteers.
- 2.21 This more individual option is very time consuming to manage operationally as well as the potential need to attract suitable and sufficient assistance to avoid offering an ad hoc, inefficient service which would be confusing for the public with no clear set of opening hours. It would require detailed analysis of need and demand in each particular site as well as the local communities' willingness to contribute to some degree to the delivery of their local library service in the evening.
- 2.22 This was a particularly popular option with library friends, user and reading groups who currently meet in their local community libraries after five o'clock. A major concern on evening closure developed because members of these groups felt that they would no longer be able to continue if the strategy proposal went ahead. If access to the library building could be facilitated another way, which it is suggested could be, then some of these objections will be answered.

NEXT STEPS

- 2.23 The Strategy will be reviewed in the light of these consultation outcomes. As part of this I intend to highlight that opening hours will be reviewed in the light of consultation responses and suggestions and will look to produce a potential schedule of opening hours together with the resource implications and options. The Library and One Stop Shop Service will undertake further analysis to 'fine tune' the proposals to ensure that users' needs are met as closely as possible.

3.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 3.1 If the Authority does not have a Libraries Strategy then it is likely that while day to day business can continue the medium to long term development will not occur in a planned and efficient way. This is especially so given the challenges facing libraries in technological and human resource terms as well as locally in the ongoing development of the community role and the linkage to One Stop Shops and Customer Services in general.

4.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 The other options detailed remain open for consideration.

5.0 CONSULTATION

5.1 Details of the consultation are given in this report.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

6.1 There are none arising directly from the approval of this strategy but these groups will form part of ongoing development and review of the strategy.

7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS; FINANCIAL, IT, STAFFING & ASSETS

7.1 **Financial** – The development of an increasingly efficient and responsive Library service and the linked development with One Stop Shops is being done within the financial constraints that the Council faces and offers potential savings in terms of buildings and staff by aligning these complementary services.

7.2 **IT** – There are none arising directly from this report.

7.3 **Staffing** – Any changes to service have a consequential impact on staffing.

7.4 **Assets** – Each Library development will assist Asset Management to maximise the effective use of facilities whilst not affecting service standards and offer an opportunity for savings with integrated flexible spaces that are modern and maximise usage.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are none arising directly from the approval of this strategy.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The Library Strategy seeks to offer access to quality local services for the benefit of all users. A commitment to equality and diversity is integral to delivering excellent services responsive to all users including those who may not be current users. The recognition that different users have different physical and service needs informs access and service plans.

9.2 Customer insight information will enable identification of customers who are vulnerable or hard to reach and working collaboratively will help to meet and support these groups in a cost effective manner.

9.3 The link to the Equality Impact Assessment for Libraries is shown below;

<http://www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/community-and-living/equality-diversity-cohesion/equality-impact-assessments/eias-2010/finance>

10.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

11.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

12.0 RECOMMENDATION

12.1 That Members note the report.

13. REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 13.1 The strategy has been formulated to provide a base for the many changes and challenges the Library service is facing both locally and nationally. This consultation has highlighted a number of issues to take account of and this report advises members of those matters and potential ways forward which will be referred to Cabinet for consideration.

FNCE/72/12

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APPENDIX

Consultation questionnaire

Overview of consultation findings

REFERENCE MATERIAL

None attached

SUBJECT HISTORY (last three years)

Council Meeting	Date
Sustainable Communities	30 January 2012
Cabinet	8 December 2011
Cabinet	23 June 2011
Cabinet	9 December 2010