

DRAFT: Libraries Service Redesign – Cabinet Decision for Scrutiny

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Cabinet Member: Cllr. David Hall - Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Planning and Community Infrastructure
Division and Local Member: All

1. Summary

- 1.1. Somerset County Council is fully committed in continuing to deliver a modern, thriving Libraries Service fit for its residents now and in the future. We are also committed to a financially sustainable future for the service.
- 1.2. A report recommending changes to the way library services are provided will be considered by the County Council's Cabinet on 5th November. If implemented, the changes recommended will result in new services being delivered in some areas, and in withdrawing funding to library buildings in other areas. The County Council has been discussing the potential for communities to support library buildings, and we will work in partnership with community groups wherever possible to try to keep library buildings open. Where it is not possible to do this, library buildings would close, and library services would be provided in different ways to ensure the County Council provides reasonable access to library services which meet local needs.
- 1.3. Whilst we are encouraged by the response from communities to date, at this point the prospects of successfully agreeing Community Library Partnerships are uncertain. The County Council has a statutory duty to deliver public library services and accordingly, the council must not depend on community support for Community Library Partnerships (which may or may not be forthcoming) to deliver its statutory service. Where Community Library Partnerships cannot be established, the County Council would deliver its statutory service through alternative mobile library, digital and outreach services.
- 1.4. An earlier officer decision has set a process and framework for agreeing and supporting Community Library Partnerships. The Cabinet report will build on that decision by recommending that, for some specific communities, direct financial support is provided to support Community Library Partnerships, if these are developed. The report also recommends how the County Council should support Community Library Partnerships through property transfer and leasing arrangements, where this is possible.
- 1.5. Following feedback from the consultation, consideration of the needs of specific communities and work to re-design the workforce, the Cabinet report also sets out recommendations for further savings within the Libraries Service. These further savings will make an important contribution towards putting the Libraries Service on a sustainable financial footing. Finally, the report recommends bringing forward a

policy on donations and philanthropic giving for local libraries, to enable businesses, communities and local people to take a stake in this much valued service and support the development of a thriving and dynamic library service into the future.

- 1.6. The Cabinet report is attached in full to this Scrutiny Report, so that committee members may scrutinise and debate the report, and give their comments to Cabinet.

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. Committee are asked to scrutinise the contents of the Cabinet Decision report and Appendices and give comments for Cabinet to consider. In doing so, members of the committee should have regard to the consultation feedback set out in Appendix 3, the assessment of needs set out in Appendix 2, and the Equalities Impact Assessment set out in Appendix 4. An explanation of how reasonable access to library services will be provided across the County is set out in detail in Appendix 1.
- 2.2. Committee are asked to note, for information, the process for inviting Expressions of Interest in Community Library Partnerships, set out in paragraph 6.2 below.

3. Background

- 3.1. A vision, outcomes framework and strategic direction for the Libraries Service was determined in November 2017. An objective was set to review and re-design the libraries network, to modernise the Libraries Service in Somerset and to put the service on a sustainable financial footing. Recommendations for changes to the way library services are delivered are presented in this report. The recommendations have been developed having considered feedback from extensive community engagement and public consultation exercises, and with regard to a full assessment of needs, access, and equalities impact. All these considerations have informed the Council's understanding of the baseline 'comprehensive and efficient' public libraries service in Somerset which the Council is required in law to provide.
- 3.2. An earlier officer decision has set a process and framework for agreeing and supporting Community Library Partnerships.
- 3.3. A major public and staff consultation exercise was carried out between 29th January and 13th June 2018. The results of this consultation exercise have been analysed, and used to develop assessments of need, access and equalities impact. These assessments underpin the recommendations in the Cabinet Report.
- 3.4. The vast majority of respondents to the public consultation exercise were strongly opposed to changes to library provision, particularly the potential closure of library buildings. Library closures would have a range of impacts, some of which could be significant for individuals, and in particular for those with certain characteristics which are protected under the Equality Act. The views of consultation respondents, and the potential impacts of library closures on people with characteristics that are protected under the Equality Act, are set out in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4 to the cabinet report.

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** The Libraries Service Redesign Programme has been conducted using a co-production approach throughout:
- The strategic direction and outcomes framework which underpins the programme was shaped through discussion with a wide range of stakeholder groups (see the background papers listed in section 3 below for further details).
 - An extensive informal engagement exercise to better understand the need for library services at a local level, and the potential for greater community involvement to support libraries, was undertaken prior to the development of consultation proposals. In the autumn of 2017, the project team met with a wide range of parish, town, district and county councillors, representatives of library friends' groups and other local stakeholders at a series of community engagement meetings.
 - Ongoing dialogue with the Friends of Somerset Libraries group (who have acted as a valuable 'critical friend' through the many changes we have made to the service in recent years) has influenced the programme at every stage.
- 4.2.** A major public and staff consultation exercise was carried out between 29th January and 13th June 2018. A wide range of stakeholder groups were consulted and provided feedback; focus groups were held with children and disabled people; and members of the public and staff provided feedback through separate survey questionnaires. Over 7000 people and organisations provided feedback, which has been carefully analysed and thoroughly considered. Further detail is available in Appendix 3 to the cabinet report, which explains how the consultation exercise was conducted, how results were analysed, and sets out a high level summary of results.
- 4.3.** The overriding message from the consultation is that the vast majority of consultation respondents were strongly opposed to changes to library service provision, especially where there was a potential risk of library closure. Where respondents were asked to express their preference for Community Library Partnerships or mobile / outreach options, there was an almost universal preference for the community partnership option as a means of retaining the library.

5. Summary of recommendations in the Cabinet Report

- 5.1.** It is recommended to Cabinet that library buildings should continue to be operated by the County Council in Minehead, Dulverton, Williton, Taunton Town Centre, Wellington, Bridgwater, Burnham-on-Sea, Glastonbury, Langport, Chard, Ilminster, Crewkerne, Yeovil Town Centre, Martock, Wincanton, Frome, Wells, Shepton Mallet and Cheddar.
- 5.2.** In respect of library buildings at Langport, Ilminster, Martock, and Cheddar, it is recommended that opportunities to reduce the net cost of these libraries are pursued as set out in section 5 of the Cabinet report. In respect of the library building at Shepton Mallet, following feedback from the public consultation exercise it is recommended that the council should spend 6 months working with community partners to develop an alternative town centre location for the library building, before taking a decision on the location of the library within Shepton Mallet (expected around May 2019, after the District Council pre-election period).

5.3. It is recommended:

- To seek to establish or maintain Community Library Partnerships in Porlock, Watchet, Wiveliscombe, Bishops Lydeard, Priorswood, Nether Stowey, North Petherton, Highbridge, Street, Somerton, Milborne Port, South Petherton, Bruton and Castle Cary; or
- Where Community Library Partnerships cannot be established, to provide library services through various combinations of Library Outreach Services, Mobile Library Services and Digital Library Services (as set out in the cabinet report), to complement reasonable access to alternative library buildings from these communities. Where it does not prove possible to establish Community Library Partnerships, library buildings in those communities would close.

5.4. It is recommended:

- To provide additional, targeted Library Outreach Services in areas of high need in Taunton, Bridgwater, Yeovil and Frome.
- To continue the provision of Mobile Library Services elsewhere across the county, reviewed and revised from time to time in line with the current policy agreed by Cabinet in March 2015.
- To maintain the Home Library Service and Digital Library Service as part of the statutory Libraries Service.

5.5. Finally, Cabinet are also recommended to:

- To provide support to Community Library Partnerships as set out in Appendix 5 to the Cabinet report.
- Endorse the development of an approach and a policy on donations and philanthropic giving for the library service
- Authorise officers to consult on a restructure of the Libraries Management Team, with a view to reducing the cost of the management team through a staff redundancy.

6. Process for developing and agreeing Community Library Partnerships:

6.1. The recommendations above include a recommendation to try to establish or maintain Community Library Partnerships to maintain library buildings in 15 communities. Community Library Partnerships are explained fully in section 4 of Appendix 1 to the Cabinet report. In summary, Community Library Partnerships:

- are partnerships between the County Council and one or more community partners, which provide a service from a library building in a community as an alternative to closing the library and providing services in other ways;
- would deliver a range of lending stock, public computer access and associated printing and scanning, public wi-fi access, and specific support for children through the Summer Reading Challenge and support to the Bookstart programme;
- would provide services to a minimum standard, monitored by the County Council through a legal contract;
- where established, would form part of the County Council's statutory Libraries Service.

6.2. The process for agreeing Community Library Partnerships was determined through a decision by the Director for Economic and Community Infrastructure Commissioning, taken on 1st October. Scrutiny Committee may wish to note this process, for information.

- On 16th October (the publication date of this report), community groups in the 15 affected communities were invited to express an interest in forming a Community Library Partnership. The invitations enclosed guidance and various supporting information and follow a long period of dialogue with these community groups stretching back to autumn 2017. A deadline for submitting Expressions of Interest was set for 15th November 2018. If no viable Expression of Interest is received for a particular library by this due date, alternative library service provision will be arranged as set out in Appendix 1 (mobile library and/or outreach library services) and the library building will close. This could happen from January 2019.
- If a viable Expression of Interest is received in November, the County Council will continue to manage and fully fund the library until 31st March 2019, to allow time for further discussions and agreement to take place. If discussions progress successfully, an agreement would be drawn up in the form of a contract which, if it is acceptable to both parties, we would aim to sign by 31 January 2019 or as soon as possible after that date. Training of volunteers and transition arrangements would commence in January 2019.
- If a viable Expression of Interest is received, but agreement cannot be reached by February 15th 2019, the County Council would commence steps to close the library and arrange alternative library provision as determined by Cabinet (i.e. mobile library and/or outreach library services). In this scenario the library would not close until 1st April 2019.

6.3. The timescales are acknowledged as challenging; this is necessary because of the County Council's challenging financial situation. Communities interested in exploring Community Library Partnership options have been supported by the County Council for a number of months now, and support will continue through the process. Exceptions to the timetable and process may be agreed on a case by case basis, but only by the written approval of the Director for Economic and Community Infrastructure Commissioning. Where exceptions are agreed, different stages of the process may overlap or be done in parallel.

7. Background papers

7.1. Appendix A - Libraries Service Redesign 2018 - Cabinet Decision Report

Appendix 1 Libraries Service Delivery Plan

Appendix 2 Needs Assessment

Appendix 3 Consultation Report

Appendix 4 Equalities Impact Assessments

Appendix 5 Support to Community Library Partnerships

7.2. Note: For sight of further background papers please visit:

<http://somersetlibraries.co.uk/redesign/>

or contact the report author.