

## Libraries Service Consultation

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Cabinet Member: Cllr. David Hall, Cabinet Member for Resources and Economic Development

Division and Local Member: All

### 1. Summary

- 1.1. A consultation exercise on the delivery of the Libraries Service in Somerset is underway, and will run until 22<sup>nd</sup> April. No decisions will be taken, or have been taken, until the consultation exercise is concluded and all results are analysed. The purpose this report is to update members of the Scrutiny for Policies and Place Committee on the consultation exercise, to provide further information on the background to the consultation and the development of the consultation proposals, and to provide information on how the Committee and County Councillors can provide feedback.

Scrutiny Committee will receive a brief presentation of the consultation material, and an update on the response rate so far, at the meeting.

### 2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. The Committee are asked to note the consultation process underway, the information used to develop the consultation proposals, and the process for providing feedback on the proposals.
- 2.2. The Committee will be presented with a further report setting out the results of the consultation exercise and any draft recommendations made at a future meeting (likely to be June 2018).

### 3. Background

- 3.1. The County Council's Cabinet set a vision and outcomes framework for the Libraries Service in December 2015. This vision and outcomes framework was reviewed and re-affirmed, with an additional outcome added, by the Cabinet Member for Resources and Economic Development in November 2017, following discussion with the Scrutiny Committee for Policy and Place at its meeting in October 2017. That meeting also considered a strategic direction for the Libraries Service, which set out an intention to review how best to continue to deliver a thriving, modern Libraries Service across a wide range of outcomes, with reducing resources over the medium term.

- 3.2. The Libraries Service is currently performing well and has delivered a number of successful, innovative projects and initiatives which have gained national recognition. The service is guided by its vision statement:

***Somerset Libraries are a dynamic, evolving and integral part of the community that open up a world of opportunities for reading, understanding and discovery.***

The Somerset Libraries Service has many strengths, and (having delivered over £1m of savings over the last 5 years) it compares well with peers in value for money terms. In order to reduce costs further and continue to deliver a thriving, modernised service, effectively targeted to meet the needs of the population, it is necessary to review and re-design how library services are delivered across Somerset.

- 3.3. The proposals under consultation have been developed following the consideration of a wide range of information and data. Information and views gathered through a series of informal engagement meetings with library friends groups, library staff, parish and town councils, local county councillors and other stakeholder groups has been taken into account. In addition to this 'soft' information, the project team has considered a wide range of 'hard' data and information from a variety of sources to support assessments of need, access, value for money and equalities impacts for different areas in Somerset. Further details on where this information can be found will be presented to the Scrutiny Committee at the meeting, and Committee members will have an opportunity to ask questions.
- 3.4. The consultation proposals show that we aim to keep as many library buildings as possible open, but that for a number of libraries, we may require community support to do this, through partnerships with local communities. Where we are unable to keep library buildings open in communities, library services will be delivered in other ways, through new library outreach services delivered outside of library buildings, or through additional mobile library stops. Our online services will continue to form an important part of library service delivery across the county. The consultation proposals for some communities set out an 'either / or' approach to delivering our statutory duty in the future – either (wherever possible) by maintaining library buildings through community library partnerships, or (where we are unable to achieve this) through alternative mobile and / or outreach services. In other communities, where we are proposing no change to existing library buildings, this means that we consider that our statutory duty requires the County Council to maintain a library building in that community into the future.
- 3.5. The consultation uses the term 'community library partnership' to describe the proposals to maintain library buildings through partnerships with local communities. The County Council has a completely open mind as to how a community could support its library – every situation will be unique, as every community is unique. A community library partnership could mean a community taking on buildings and staff, volunteers working in the library, or financial support - for example through a parish precept – towards the cost of the library. The County Council will support any community wanting to take on their library with training and ongoing technical support, the provision of book stock (including a regular supply of new books) and ICT equipment. Over and above this, we are proposing that funding of £5,000 per annum will be available to support community library partnerships in some communities – those that have more

difficulty accessing alternative library buildings, and / or where local needs are higher, or libraries are well-used.

- 3.6. The term 'library outreach services' is used to describe a new service delivery model where library services would be delivered outside of library buildings. Outreach services would be designed to meet the needs of more deprived communities, and deliver the library service commissioned outcomes in a targeted way through a wide range of activities, events and public internet access services. The exact mix of activities and services would vary, depending on the need in different areas.
- 3.7. Mobile library services are delivered by our mobile library, a purpose-built 'travelling library' which serves a network of stops on a regular schedule, for an allotted period of time, in communities that do not have a library building. Our current mobile library also serves schools, nurseries and residential homes in some communities that do have a library building. Mobile library services are currently delivered at over 170 scheduled stops around the county and the network of stops is regularly reviewed under an agreed policy. For some areas, we are proposing to add additional stops to the current mobile library network, as an alternative, where library buildings cannot be maintained through community library partnerships.

#### 4. The current consultation process

- 4.1. Public and staff consultation exercises were launched in January and February respectively. These two consultation exercises will be carried out in tandem, but as separate exercises.

**Public Consultation** – this will run for 12 weeks to the 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2018. The proposals and background information are available publicly online, in paper form in each of our 34 libraries and on application in other formats. Details of the consultation and the dates of consultation events have been sent to a wide range of individuals and groups, including local press, social media, Parish and Town Councils, the library customer database, small business associations, library users and particular equalities groups through Compass Disability and the Somerset Equalities Officer Group. People and organisations are encouraged to respond via an online or paper questionnaire. This allows us to collate and analyse empirical data, as well as gathering feedback on the proposals and alternative ideas through 'free text' responses. An email address has been provided to enable people to give more detailed or specific responses.

Drop-in events in, or nearby to, each community that could be significantly affected by the proposals have been arranged during February and March 2018. These events provide an opportunity for interested parties to ask questions about the proposals or hold discussions with members of the Libraries Service management team, prior to individuals giving their views through the questionnaire or email address provided.

- 4.2. **Staff Consultation** - feedback from Libraries Service staff will be very important in shaping any final decisions on the future delivery of library services, and we are seeking their views (and the views of Trade Union representatives) through a separate staff consultation exercise. This will run through to the end of March 2018. The consultation will gather feedback on the same proposals and staff will be able to access the same background information and detail of the proposals

through the website, or through information in libraries. Staff will be asked to give their views on the proposals, the underlying rationale, and to suggest any alternative options. A series of face-to-face staff meetings are being held during February and March, which provided an opportunity for staff to ask questions and discuss the proposals with members of the library management team.

- 4.3. Data and information gathered during the consultation will be analysed and the results of the analysis will be presented to this Committee for comment – this is likely to be at the meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2018.

## **5. Implications**

- 5.1. There are no implications arising directly from this report. A detailed analysis of the potential implications of the consultation proposals (including an Equalities Impact Assessment) is set out as part of the Cabinet Member decision taken in January 2018 – see background papers for further details.

## **6. Background papers**

- 6.1. Decision of the Cabinet Member for Resources and Economic Development: Somerset Library Service Consultation 2018 – 18<sup>th</sup> January 2018 (available at <http://democracy.somerset.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=632>).
- 6.2. Libraries Consultation website (available at <http://somersetlibraries.co.uk/consultation>).

**Note:** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author