

## **Libraries Scrutiny Review – Interim Report**

### **Background to Review**

1. At a meeting of the Learning & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee in September 2012, the Committee received an update on a previously completed scrutiny review of library provision across the city together with a briefing on the current provision. The Committee agreed they wanted to investigate further local library provision across the city and their use as community hubs providing other Council services, in order to ascertain whether the Council is making best use of library buildings and if more could be developed as community hubs to better serve residents in their surrounding locale. The Committee set up a Task Group to carry out the review on their behalf, and agreed the following objectives for the review:
  - i. To increase the number of people going into libraries
  - ii. To make better use of library buildings (whilst not undermining the integrity of the library service)
  - iii. To provide greater access to Council and third sector services, and provide more opportunities for community engagement on local issues.

### **Background to Library Provision**

2. It is recognised that the most successful library services work in close partnership with local Councils and local people, to tailor their services to meet local needs. Underpinning this, libraries aim to be welcoming, neutral and safe places for communities to come together and help develop the ties that are essential for local wellbeing and quality of life.
3. Nationally, all public libraries are focussed around a common purpose i.e. :
  - To develop and enhance the literacy, digital and information skills of residents to enable them to become active citizens.
  - Support learning through access to knowledge and content, and provide space and support to learn, and;

- Support businesses and entrepreneurs in an effort to contribute to the sustainability and regeneration of local communities.

#### 4. Library Provision in York

The range and variety of services offered by libraries across the UK varies to reflect local community priorities. In York, the core service offered at every library is:

- Free Internet access and free Wi-Fi
- A children's area & young people's area
- Fiction and non-fiction books for children, young people and adults in a range of formats
- Large print books and audio books
- Reference books and enquiry service
- Online reference sources
- Information and advice for learning and work
- Books to support your learning
- Information about local services
- Adult Learning course information
- Reading Groups
- Story times for under fives
- Family and local history
- Newspapers and magazines
- Community events
- Surgeries e.g. ward councillor, future prospects
- Community space

#### 5. The Use of Libraries as Community Hubs

As a result of the libraries scrutiny review completed in 2005, the Council agreed a vision for the library service – one that put learning at the heart of the service and centred on the principle that libraries should not just be libraries but places that add value to their communities in a whole host of ways i.e. they should be spaces that are:

- Modern, contemporary - designed to meet the needs of the communities they serve
- Outward looking - connected with the surrounding landscape and community, drawing people in
- Welcoming - where staff are proactive in helping people make sense of the complex world of information sources
- Customer first - combining the design principles of a modern layout of a bookshop with the traditional values of a library service

- Engaging – inspiring people to join a reading group or a homework club, listen to storytelling, sign up to an evening class, discover their family history, have a coffee, meet new people, surf the internet, access any book ever published, look for job opportunities, learn with their families, hire the latest DVD, access information that enables them to make informed life choices and supports independent living
6. This vision for the library service has influenced everything that the service now does. It led to the development of a partnership between libraries and adult education which delivers the concept of library learning centres – or Explore Centres as they have become known. There are now three Explore library learning centres – Acomb, New Earswick and York City Centre.
  7. Along with the core library services listed above, York’s Explore Centres also offer the following wider range of services:
    - Changing Places facility
    - Cafe
    - Archive and local history centre
    - ICT suite
    - More in depth support for research and information queries
    - Big name author events
    - Exhibitions
    - Adult Education enrolment & Learning rooms
  8. The Explore concept is now recognised and popular. Visitors and issues have increased at all three centres, bucking a national decline in library use. The centres are seen by local people as the hub of their community and there are a wide range of activities taking place in the flexible spaces. CYC’s library staff have built strong links into the community and this now needs to be developed further by becoming more integrated into the library vision.
  9. Current partnerships and relationships have developed on an almost ad hoc basis e.g. a ward committee meeting held at Acomb spawned the idea for this to become a regular option across all of the libraries. Similarly, a spontaneous ‘knit and natter’ session at Acomb inspired a number of similar groups across other libraries in the city, and there are now thriving groups using a majority of the libraries.

10. Future Vision for Libraries Across the City

The vision for libraries is that they become the place within the local community where residents can go for information on:

- their community and council services
- how to become more involved in their community

**Information Gathered**

11. In order to explore how this might be developed strategically across the service, the Task Group agreed to explore the current opportunities for accessing such information at a public library.
12. The Task Group agreed to carry out site visits to a number of libraries to see and experience the services being provided, and to meet with staff and talk with library users. The libraries chosen were:
13. **Acomb** – York's second busiest library with around 10,000 visits per month. It was the first Explore Library Learning Centre offering a range of facilities (as shown in paragraph 7 above).
14. The Task Group were very impressed with the Acomb Explore and agreed it offered an ideal range of facilities in a fully accessible building, in the right location for the community it served.
15. The Task Group also noted the provision of a direct dial phone for housing benefit enquiries and learnt that Library Services had partnered with the benefits service to introduce the phone advice service allowing customers to drop in and use the phone to get through to a member of the housing team for advice. The Task Group queried how often it was used in order to ascertain whether it would be beneficial to offer this service in all community libraries situated within or close-by social housing estates.
16. **Tang Hall** - After Acomb, this is the second biggest community library with an average of 5,000 a month through the door. It is situated next to a health centre in one of York's more deprived areas, and is set across 2 floors. It offers a meeting room and ICT suite, both of which are used by the council's adult education partners to deliver courses to members of the public.
17. In comparing the library to the Acomb Explore, the Task Group agreed the reception area at Tang Hall could be better utilised to provide access to more community/council information. Discussion took place around future options for the library and the possibility of expansion.

The Task Group learnt that there was some room for extension at the current site, and that architect's plan has been produced to show how it might work.

18. However, work was currently ongoing to look at the best ways of developing the nearby, and the Task Group learnt that there was a suggestion that a community hub with space enough to consolidate a full range of public and voluntary sector services be built on the school site. This would allow for a new purpose-built Explore centre to replace the current library, providing a bigger and better library and learning service with all of the usual community hub facilities.
19. The Committee also noted the current community provision provided at the nearby community centre on Fifth Avenue and agreed that any development either at the current library site, or in the future at the Burnholme School site, would need to be properly considered so as not to effect the viability of that community centre.
20. **Strensall** – A small community library, open 18 hours a week with an average of 2,000 a month through the door. The staff have developed excellent links with the local community to the extent that the library is a key part of community life within the village e.g. taking part in summer fetes, being a venue in the village jubilee celebration etc.
21. Discussion took place around the current opening hours for Strensall library and the possibility to extend those hours to allow use of the building for other purposes – perhaps allowing a voluntary sector partners to hire the space. The Task Group recognised there was limited space in the building and there may be accessibility issues. They also questioned whether the library was in the right location for the village, but recognised there were no other Council owned properties in the village suitable for such use.
22. **Clifton** – A purpose-built, half time library and learning centre. Discussion took place around the location of the library and the size of the community it serviced. The Task Group noted there was some room for extension on the site and that architects plans had previously been drawn up. However, they agreed that the location of the library was not ideal based on the size of the community it serviced, but recognised there were no better placed Council-owned buildings available in the vicinity. The Task Group queried where the library patrons were coming from, as that might help identify a better location for the library.

23. The Task Group also noted that the library was very traditional in its provision and layout etc, although its patrons did not appear to have a problem with that (possibly due to the majority of patrons being of an older age range and therefore more used to a traditional library).
24. The Task Group's detailed feedback from their visits is shown at Annex A.
25. Other Community Provision  
In considering a move towards those four libraries becoming community hubs, the Task Group looked at what other community provision currently existed in their local vicinity, as they recognised it would not be helpful to take opportunities for generating income away from other nearby community facilities. They also received information from CYC Asset Management on other Council owned buildings in the areas surrounding those libraries which were currently being used by community groups and where residents were accessing council and/or third sector services.
26. Finally, the Task Group received information from the council's mobile community services on the types of enquiries they often receive from members of the public about other council/community services e.g.:
- **Mobile Library Service** confirmed they often receive a range of enquires:
    - Health Issues e.g. *"My doctor says I need this operation do you have any info about the condition and being in hospital? Can I use your wifi/PCs to book the time?"*
    - Job Issues e.g. *"Can I look at the Press for jobs? / How do I apply for a job online? / Can I learn more about this company I have an interview with? / I need to update my CV"*
    - Financial Issues e.g. how to budget, latest stocks and shares, 'Which' magazine, courses to learn how to manage budgets
    - Council Services e.g. *"How do I report a broken lamp post? / How do I get a council meeting agenda/minutes?"* or requests for information on planning applications / councillors / schools / community asset transfer / right to challenge / CYC website access / payments online etc
    - National Govt Information e.g. VAT online, passport and driving licence applications etc

- Community Information e.g. on forthcoming events, reading groups, focus for community activity, how to volunteer etc
- **URBIE** (CYC mobile youth club for young people) confirmed they had received no specific requests for services such as housing or benefits. However during general conversations they often raise awareness of the issues of housing and benefit for young people, and have highlighted the role of Castlegate in giving advice, and the use of websites such as CYC and the young people's survival guide.

27. The Task Group agreed that information on a range of council services together with contact information, and similar appropriate information from the Council's partners and third sector organisations should be made readily available in Libraries either on notice boards or via leaflets etc. The Task Group also agreed it would be useful if all libraries displayed more community information and details on how to volunteer and participate in responding to issues affecting their local community.

28. Recent Public Consultation on Local Libraries

Finally, the Task Group considered a report highlighting feedback from a recently completed public consultation on local libraries - see Annex B.

**Conclusions to Date**

29. Overall the Task Group agreed that where possible it would be helpful to increase the opening hours in those library buildings where the layout of the building and/or the availability of additional rooms, would allow for their alternative use.

30. Communities should be encouraged to use the buildings and the space they provide for community purposes.

31. Whilst library buildings are being used by the community, where at all possible and where self-service facilities are in place (or could be provided in the future), the library opening hours should be extended to provide a basic level of library service without the need for library staff.

**Concluding Work on the Review**

32. At this meeting Officers will provide:

- A verbal update on the draft business plan for a potential social enterprise to operate the Council's Library and Archives services;

- Information on adult learning opportunities offered through the Library Service e.g. provision of ESOL at Clifton;
- Some example definitions of a community hub.

33. The Task Group is asked to:

- Consider the consultation findings shown at Annex B and the new information provided at this meeting (as listed in paragraph 32 above) so that their views and any suggestions arising can be included in the draft final report for this review.
- Agree if any additional information is required to conclude the work on this review.

34. If no further information is required, the Task Group is asked to identify some appropriate draft recommendations for the review.

### Recommendation

35. In light of the above options, the Task Group is recommended to agree their draft recommendations arising from this review, and any required revisions to this report, so that it may form the draft final report for this scrutiny review and be presented to the next meeting of Learning & Culture O & S Committee.

Reason: To complete the work on this review in line with scrutiny procedures and protocols.

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**Report  
 Approved**

**Date** 29 March 2013

Wards Affected:

All

**For further information please contact the author of the report**

### Annexes:

**Annex A** - Site Visits - Information Gathered

**Annex B** - Report on Recent Libraries Public Consultation