Consultation with residents on proposed changes to Libraries and Archives

Summary Report

On behalf of the City of York Council

24/05/13

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Contents

1. Introduction

Qa Research (Qa) was commissioned by the City of York Council Libraries and Archives to carry out a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews over a three week period from the 19th April to the 9th May.

The research was design to understand individuals' perceptions of the proposed changes to libraries and archives, which will see the service established as a community benefit society, separate from direct Council control.

This summary report contains:

- The aims and objectives of the research;
- The methodology utilised to gather individuals' views;
- Key findings;
- Recommendations.

This consultation forms part of an ongoing programme to explore the feasibility of delivering the libraries and archives service as a staff-led mutual. It follows on from the successful application for assistance from the Cabinet Mutual Support programme, and the presentation to Cabinet on the 8th January of a report highlighting the potential benefits the Council's library and archive services could receive from becoming a social enterprise in the form of a community benefit society. This report is available at:

http://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s78593/Libraries%20and%20Archives%20Community%20Benefit%20Society.pdf

A final decision on whether to transfer the libraries and archives service to a community benefit society is set to be made the Cabinet in June 2013, this report serves to highlight the attitudes, concerns and potential benefits identified by residents and users of the library should this transfer take place.

2.   Aims and Objectives

Following on from a report to cabinet in January 2013 which concluded that the Council's library and archive services could benefit from becoming a social enterprise in the form of a community benefit society. The Libraries and archives are currently undertaking a number of activities to explore the feasibility of a transfer of the service to a community benefit society, these activities include

- Develop a business plan for a community benefit society;
- Establish a shadow community benefit society governance structure for the purpose of negotiating with the Council the terms of a potential transfer;
- Engage further with the public and with staff on the proposal;
- Bring back a further report to the Cabinet identifying whether it would be in the overall interests of the Council to transfer the Libraries and Archive service to a community benefits society.

This programme of research was designed to assist libraries and archives with the third bullet-point, specifically further engagement with the public on the proposed changes. The research was designed to explore the perceptions of service users and residents in the following areas:

- Awareness of the proposed changes to the libraries and archives service;
- Communication channels used to access information on the changes and views on the information provided so far;
- Understanding of the proposals and initial reactions to the proposed changes including perceptions of the drivers leading to the proposed change in delivery model;
- Following on from a discussion about what the proposed changes may look like in practice – understanding the concerns that individuals had about the potential impacts of the changes on particular areas of the service and understanding views on the potential benefits of the changes;
- Explore interest among individuals for future involvement in the new libraries service, particularly membership roles.

3.   Methodology

A total of 6 focus groups were been scheduled, five of these focus groups were well attended, with 53 individuals attending in total. The final group experienced a low-uptake and was therefore cancelled. The few individuals (3) who had indicated a desire to attend the final group were offered the chance to take part in an in-depth telephone interview in order to share their views.

Groups were held at various times and locations, as highlighted in the table below.

Group Number	Time	Location	Attendance
1	12.30 pm	Tang Hall Library	9
2	12.30 pm	Central Library	11
3	10.30 am	Acomb Library	14
4	6.00 pm	Central Library	11
5	12.30 pm	Central Library	8

In addition to these groups 3 in-depth interviews were held with individuals who indicated a desire to attend a group but were unable to do so following the cancellation of the final group.

Individuals were recruited to the focus groups via contact directly from Libraries and Archives and via notices stationed within the library buildings across York. Once individuals had registered their interest in attending, they were provided with a series of documents prior to attending the groups. These documents included the following:

- *FAQ Sheet on the proposed changes* – This document has been produced by York libraries and archives and provides some responses to common questions that people have asked about the proposed changes
- *Report to Cabinet, January 2013* – This document was presented to the Council in January, its sets out the background to the proposed changes to libraries and archives and the reasons and evidence behind the proposed changes
- *Quick guide to Public Service Mutual's* – This document provides a basic introduction into the concept of public service mutual models, which includes the community benefit society approach which would apply to York libraries and archives. It highlights the main considerations for organisations looking to use this approach.

Individuals were also given the opportunity to pose questions about the service prior to attending. These questions were collated and responded to during the groups. As well as individual residents and users of the libraries and archives services being invited to attend, there was also attendance from individuals representing community groups and/ or residents organisations. Where appropriate these individuals were asked to make a distinction between their own views and those of the individuals they may be representing.

The focus groups were designed to last approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. The structure of the groups was informed by a discussion guide developed by Qa Research with input from the libraries and archives team. The guide was design to prompt a series of discussion and activities to capture the information required. A copy of the discussion guide is appended to this report.

It should be noted that focus groups are often adapted during their delivery to accommodate the particular direction of the discussions being held. In some instance within the group the structure of the guide may not have been followed in a linear fashion, however when summarising the results similar themes have been brought together for clarity.

4.   Key Findings

In this section we discuss the main findings highlighted by the research. The following pages are split into a number of sub-sections which broadly follow the structure of the focus groups:

- Awareness of changes and any informational requirements;
- Initial attitudes toward the changes and views on the proposed scheme, and perceptions of the reasons leading to the change;
- Perceived potential impacts of the changes on the delivery of services;
- Potential interest in becoming involved with the service in the future.

Where appropriate charts and diagrams have been used to summarise the responses of individuals to the activities undertaken. Quotes have been incorporated into the report to provide emphasise to the points being made.

Within the key findings section, author's summaries are inserted in shaded boxes to differentiate them from the main body of the text.

4.1   Awareness of the changes

At the very start of the groups, following introductions and a discussion of the background information relevant to the research, respondents were asked to indicate their awareness of the proposed changes before they were asked to come along to the groups.

In general awareness levels were generally low, the vast majority of those attending had little knowledge of the proposed changes, with many indicating that the invitation to attend a focus group on the changes was the first they had heard of the proposals. This was despite the fact that many of those attending were regular users of the libraries and archives.

'The first thing was when I saw the posters [in the central library] about these groups.'

'I was talking to a few of my friends before coming along to the meeting… I would say they are regular users of the library but they all didn't know that [these changes] were happening… I reckon it must be the same for lots of people.'

As well as low awareness about the fact that the changes were occurring, many respondents were even more unclear on the actual specifics of the proposed changes and what the changes would mean in practice. As we see later, this lack of understanding has meant that for many individuals initially confronted with the changes, attitudes are generally those of caution and concern.

For those individuals that did have some prior knowledge of the changes, this had generally been gained through their own investigations (on the internet), or from conversations with library staff rather than recalling any specific information from local media sources. There was a vague recall among a minority of respondents of articles they may have seen in the press but even for these respondents a more detailed understanding of what the potential changes might look like was missing:

'I volunteer as part of the home library service and the manager was keeping us informed about what is generally happening… We also had somebody from [libraries and archives] come to present to us about some of the changes, but it left us all with more questions.'

Whilst a small number of attendees were very well informed about the changes, and saw the focus groups as an opportunity to gather additional information about the changes. The majority generally indicated they felt 'not very well informed' about the proposals, and there was a strong feeling that more could be done to let people know about the changes. The general consensus was that the Council has a duty to be proactive in making residents aware of the proposed changes. This included residents who were not necessarily users of the library:

'Before [my baby] was born I never really used [the library], but now they are something that we… rely upon. So you can see for some people even if they're not using it now it is something that has the potential to affect them in the future… They should know.'

As libraries and archives are a universal service everybody should be given the opportunity to have a say on the proposed changes, as the proposal become more developed:

'It's something that affects everyone… so they have got to let people know about what might be going on.'

In terms of mechanisms for disseminating this information, making information available within libraries was seen as crucial. Whilst a number of individuals recalled seeing large posters on display at the central library, this was not always the case at libraries elsewhere:

'Here [in York Central library] [information on the proposed changes] is ok, there is the posters outside and the leaflet, but in my library there [was] nothing I think.'

The libraries and archives website was another resource that individuals felt could be used more effectively for the provision of information. Although a number of people had found reference to the proposed changes to libraries and archives on the website, often this information was difficult to find:

'The website is so difficult to find the specific information, and then when I did find it the links aren't working {Author's note: I believe this respondent is referring to the link to the Cabinet report on the library website}.'

One view that was repeatedly expressed, particularly by older participants, was that the internet should not be the primary way to let people know about the changes, and that the use of newsletters and resident networks were a valuable way of disseminating information for those who may not be particularly IT literate - although respondents recognised that this may have more value after the proposed changes had progressed further.

Summary

Awareness that changes in the libraries and archive service are being proposed was low, with most respondents unsure of what the changes would actually look like in practice.

Participants in the groups suggested a need for the Council to work on raising awareness of the changes and providing information on the changes in an accessible format, and pushing that information out to the wider York resident population.

4.2   Initial attitudes to the changes

Before the proposed changes were discussed in more detail, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they felt they were for or against the changes on the basis of the information they had absorbed so far.

Whilst there was a greater tendency for respondents to be against the proposed changes than for the changes, for the vast majority of participants there was unease about making a judgment one way or the other, and this was driven by a lack of understanding about what the proposed changes will mean in practice:

> *'I really don't feel I can make a judgement on it… I would say I'm against it but that's [be]cause I just don't know why it has to change.'*

The prevailing attitude was one of 'if it isn't broke, why fix it?', the libraries and archive service is seen as a vibrant and valuable service, so individuals were concerned about the impact that changes might have on how the service is delivered. This viewpoint is obviously tied up with individuals' understanding about why there is a need for libraries and archives to change, as opposed to the service continuing as it is. Before going in to more details about the main reasons for libraries and archives wanting to move to the mutual benefit society model, participants in the focus groups were asked to indicate why they felt the changes to delivery were being proposed. Overwhelmingly at this stage in the group respondents indicated the main reason for making the change was financial:

> *'[Budgets] are being cut across the Council… everybody has got less money so they probably have to do something like this.'*

> *'I just think it is all financially driven, you have to think if the money was there they wouldn't be doing it.'*

> *'I think it is a money saving thing… [the Council] is making cuts, my husband has been made redundant so they are reducing services… my concern is that is just another way of doing this without [provoking] a strong reaction… from people.'*

> *'I think it is a purely economic [decision], surely people can't justify any changes as improving the service if the main reason for the change is that they are costing less.'*

The viewpoint highlighted in the previous comment, where the proposed changes were a strategy for reducing service levels *'on the sly'* (as one participant put it), was consistent across all the groups, particularly at the start of each group before the changes were discussed in more detail. Some also referred to the proposed changes as 'privatisation' or 'privatisation by the backdoor'.

This viewpoint, combined with the fact that most of the attendees of the groups were strong advocates and users of the libraries and archives service, has meant that attitudes towards the proposed changes were strongly linked to a perception of 'cuts' and subsequent reductions in service levels. This appeared to be the main driver of the initial cautious attitude of participants towards the changes.

In order to encourage participants to discuss their feeling towards the proposed changes in more detail, each group was provided with a word board and asked to select those words which they felt best described their current feelings towards the proposals. The following word board was provided:

Uneasy	Positive	Inevitable	Well thought out
Avoidable	Hesitant	Concerned	Necessary
Unclear	Opposed	Ambivalent	Rushed
Lack of transparency	Good opportunity	Apprehensive	Unsure
Support	Cautious	Beneficial	Undecided

The following diagram indicates those words mot selected by respondents:

Word board responses

Unsurprisingly, given the lack of information respondents had seen regarding the proposed changes there was a perceived lack of clarity about the changes and a lack of understanding as to what changes would mean in practice. This meant that for many individuals there was a perceived 'lack of transparency' about the changes and a lack of trust regarding whether the changes would benefit service users.

The high selection of words such as 'apprehensive' and 'cautious' was also linked to the lack of information individuals felt they had about the proposed changes, which lead to a default position of caution.

The viewpoint that the proposed changes were 'inevitable' and bound to take place regardless of any consultation or opposition was also a regularly occurring viewpoint. This was tied up with the previously discussed perception that the changes were primarily taking place as a result of the financial constraints arising as a result of budget reductions:

'The question is, would this be happening if the money was there? And I don't think it is which makes me say that this is all just inevitable'

'In a way it feels like Hobson's choice surely... if the decision is no we won't go for this then all we are doing is leaving the service in the direct control of the Council who themselves had said that maybe only 80% of resources that are available will be made available.'

Although overt negative responses were not generally evidenced, the fact that many individuals felt the changes were primarily financially motivated meant that individuals were less inclined to identify the potential positive elements of the proposals and it was not clear to people how the service would differ in terms of its day to day activities:

'Feels like change for change's sake at the moment.'

'The service is very good and let's face it is a bit of a beacon and other cities have looked at it and gone "isn't that good"... So therefore you think that any changes can only be negative and it does make you think that... If it really is good... to then say let's change it all is very odd.'

Despite this there were a number of respondents with more positive views on the proposals. A number of people seemed to think there may be good opportunities but needed to know more about the details. They realised the strains of keeping libraries and the service going and that demographics were changing and libraries were getting fewer resources and welcomed a response by libraries and archives which sought to maximise and preserve services for users during a time of financial constraint.

'They have to move forward... if this is the best way to keep developing [the service] then fine, you can't just stick in the past.'

'Working as a volunteer [for the libraries service], you can see that cuts are happening... we are being asked to help out more, this is fine but there are less staff and you notice this... so if it means that more libraries [can be kept] open then that's obviously a good thing.'

'I said opportunity because I think it is a chance for us to get more involved, as long as libraries aren't closing and people will still be able to get the things they are getting out of it that they can now then ok.'

'My initial reactions when I heard was "what's all this about"... but then as I read through it I actually thought it was quite interesting. Leaving aside any cynicism about government...It did seem to make a lot of sense even though I didn't understand it all and I felt it was something I'd like to know more about and perhaps get involved in.'

Summary

Participants in the focus groups were initially cautious about the proposed changes, whilst outright hostility towards the proposals was rare, there was some confusion and uncertainty about what the changes would mean in practice.

A number of respondents were suspicious about the motivation for the proposed changes, with many respondents assuming that the change was primarily a mechanism for the Council to

reduce the resources it provides to libraries and archives. This was subsequently associated with a likelihood of reduced service levels in the future, and therefore a more cautious attitude towards the proposed changes.

Some respondents were positive about the opportunities provided by a mutual benefit society, but felt they needed more information in order to form a more definitive opinion.

4.3   Impacts and benefits of the proposed changes

After discussing respondents' awareness of the changes, and their initial reactions to hearing about the proposals, a more detailed discussion was held on what the changes would mean in practice. This was primarily for those respondents who had not had the opportunity to digest the information sent out prior to the groups; it was also an opportunity for individuals to ask specific questions about the proposed changes. Any questions raised by respondents prior to the groups were passed on to libraries and archives in order for a response to be provided.

The following list summarises the typical questions and concerns raised by respondents over the course of the consultation:

- Concerns about the potential for privatisation of the service in the future;
- How the transfer of power from the Council to the community benefit society will work in practice;
- Assurances about the future funding and sustainability of the libraries and archives service;
- What provisions will there be for an asset lock?
- What sources of income will the new service have over and above the funding from the Council – how much will the Council continue to contribute?
- Why has the community benefit society model been chosen, why can't the service just stay as it is?
- Who will have the power to control the new service in the future?
- What happens if people decide that the new model isn't working after the change has taken place?
- What happens if the new service gets into financial difficulties?

Libraries and archives also provided a list of the main reasons and messages leading to the consideration of a mutual benefit society as the most appropriate method for delivering services in the future. This list was given to respondents during the groups and their reactions to the list were captured. This list is appended to the end of this report.

Many of the answers to these questions are provided in the cabinet report and the frequently asked question document produced by libraries and archives, however they were still some issues such as what happens to the buildings and questions about sustainability and need for change that could be covered more explicitly in the information provided. Following on from a more detailed discussion about the proposed changes and after responding to those questions (where the moderator was able), a discussion was held with respondents about any ongoing concerns about the proposed changes, and the important messages respondents felt needed to be communicated about the proposed changes.

Those messages seen as being particularly positive and in need of emphasis by the Council included the fact that no libraries will close:

> 'That top message [that no libraries will be closed] is the most important, they really need to stress that to people.'

And also that the Council will continue to be involved in providing oversight on the service:

'I like that the Council would still be involved… so this would mean that they would step in if things aren't being delivered properly? That is important but it means that the agreements need to be right.'

Whilst the statutory protection of the library service was seen to offer some protection for the libraries service, a number of respondents expressed concerns about whether or not the archives service was afforded the same protection, and wanted more information about what would happen to the ownership of the archives:

'What about the archives? Because I would be worried that they are not protected in the same way.'

Many individuals still had a number of questions about the scheme, and in particular about the decision making process for deciding on the community benefit society model as the most appropriate mechanism for delivering services in the future. At the heart of this was a desire for more detailed knowledge on what the alternatives would be, and why keeping the service in Council control could not deliver the same benefits. One of the main drivers of this was the perceived success of the library and archives over the past few years:

'Without seeing what the alternatives are [it is hard] to make any kind of assessment on whether these changes are a positive… You look at how things have changed with explore and everything, and the library have been making these kind of changes any way so I still can't see how changing things would allow them to achieve anything that they can't already do.'

'If the changes don't happen what happens to the service, do things stay the same… the service is already good.'

What happens at the end of the five years was also of concern to many respondents. Despite pointing out that the level of funding provided to the Council may change anyway (regardless of whether or not the service stays in direct Council control) there was a concern about a lack of future accountability which appeared to worry respondents:

'I think the [good] intentions might be there, but then when the grant gets reduced in the future there will be no come back for the Council.'

'Where is the main thrust of the funding coming from and where are all these opportunities for incremental funding coming from? Because until we understand that, we really can't make any judgement whether the thing stands up financially and what the implications may be for the long term structure of the service.'

There was also a worry that the service was being over-optimistic about the potential for accessing grant money:

'As someone who works for a charity I would say that everyone seems to be going for grant money, and of you get any you are often tied to delivering a particular service… [The libraries and archives service] would not be able to just spend the money where they wanted.'

'What happens if the service starts to make a loss? Who pays for that?'

Perhaps the biggest concerns respondents had about the changes (and this was linked to future resource levels) was that it could lead to reductions in service levels, this involved factors such as reductions in staff levels, and library closures and opening times. Despite information from libraries and archives indicating this was not going to take place, worries about an increase in volunteers to replace staff and libraries closures was still at the forefront of many individuals' minds – there was still a degree of scepticism about the overarching motives for making the change, which appeared to be driven by the national context of reduced public expenditure and suspicions of privatisation.

Privatisation was not explicitly mentioned by most respondents, but there was an underlying concern about what would happen to the tangible assets of the libraries and archives, particularly with regards property. There was a strong feeling that library buildings, where already Council property, should remain in Council hands.

> '[The cabinet report] seemed unclear to me about the buildings. Will the new changes mean they pay a rent or will they own [the buildings], and things like upkeep and repairing things [need to be considered].'

> 'I really think they need to look at an asset lock… to give them some protection for the future.'

Despite the concerns of respondents many were enthusiastic about the potential benefits, particularly the opportunity to foster greater community involvement:

> 'I think that things have got to change, libraries are more about the community now… a place to meet, so if this is the best way to involve communities, then I would be happy with it.'

The idea of greater local control over how services were delivered was also appealing to respondents:

> 'The local control… needs to be careful about what happens to those [libraries] in areas where people might not want to get involved, but [local people]… {having} a say is [good].'

The fact that money was re-invested in the service was also appealing to participants; however it was not clear to respondents how this was different to the current model of operation.

What was particularly telling about individuals' discussions during the focus groups were the potential benefits that were not picked up or not discussed. Factors such as increasing the 'responsiveness', 'innovation' and 'enterprising' capacity of the service were not generally discussed by individuals or seen as benefits despite prompting, mainly because respondents were unsure about what this would actually mean in practice:

> 'I don't know what they mean by entrepreneurial, [is that] about selling on things, [because] they have things like the café already in Acomb.'

Summary

Following on from a detailed discussion about the proposed changes respondents were positive about the potential for members to have a direct say in how the organisation is managed, and for increasing levels of local flexibility in the delivery of services.

There were specific concerns about the financial viability of the scheme, and worries about relying too much on external grants.

The sustainability of the new delivery model was also mentioned, with concerns that the change would open the door to the Council significantly reducing funding in the future.

The long term protection of assets such as the building and the archives was felt to be crucial.
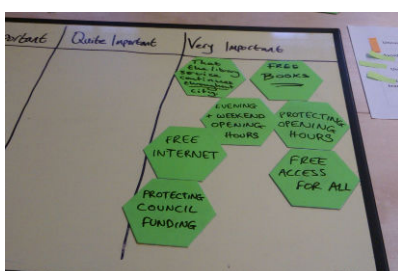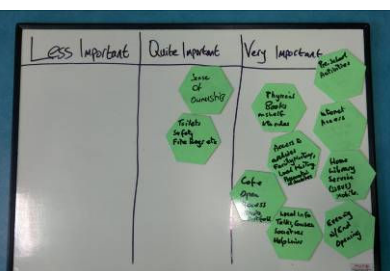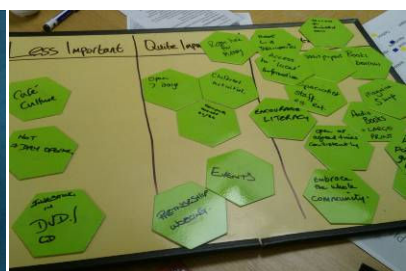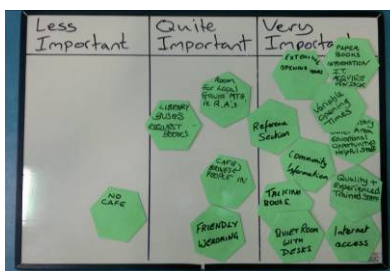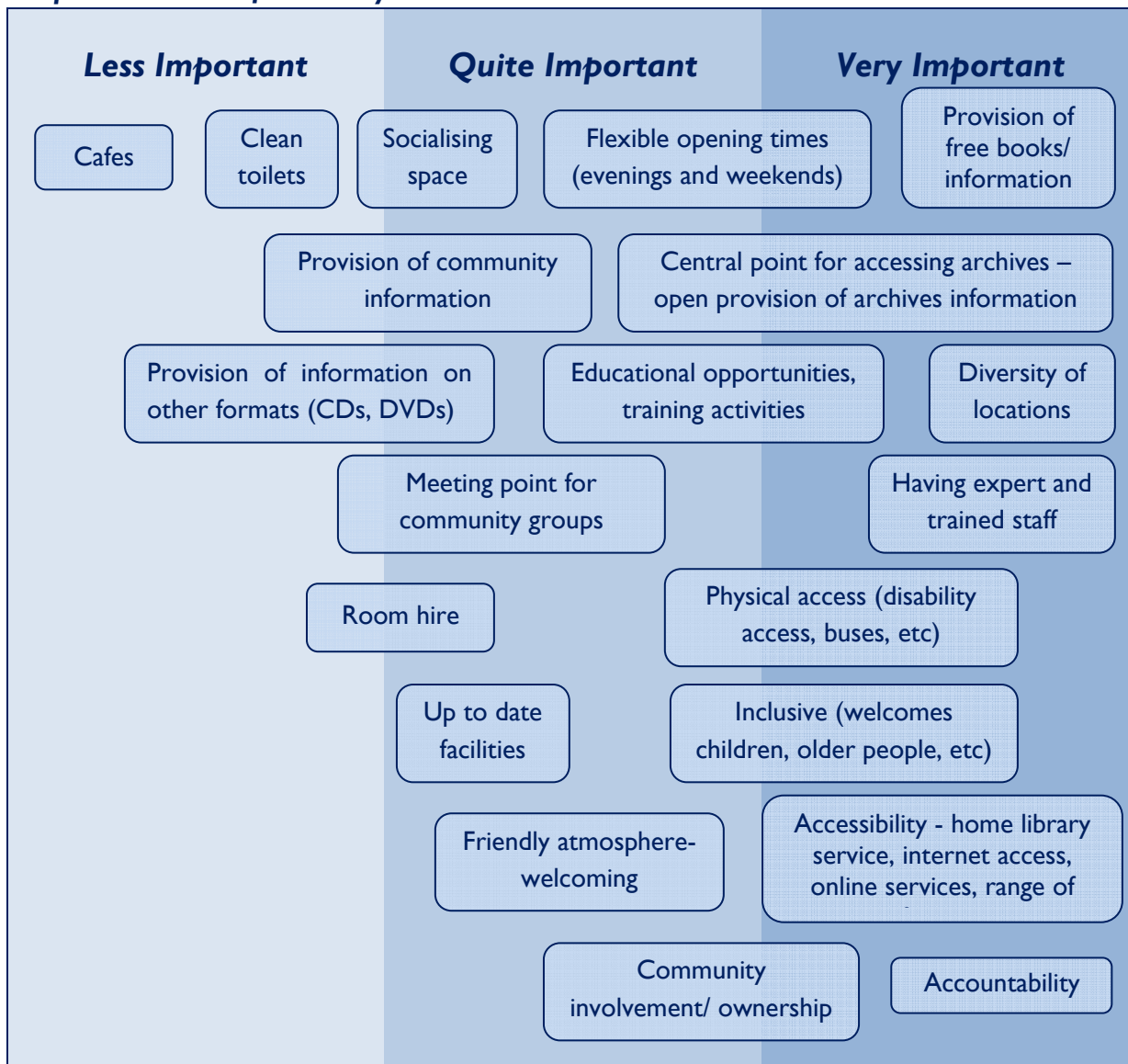
The penultimate part of the focus groups sought to understand participants' perceptions of the impacts of the proposed changes on specific areas of the libraries and archives service. Participants were asked to write down the things they thought libraries and archives should provide. This could be anything from simply taking out books, to accessing the internet or attending community meetings, providing training, having trained staff, etc. Respondents were then asked to indicate how important each of these elements are to the delivery of a successful libraries and archives service.

Following on from this activity, respondents indicated the impact they felt the proposed move to a mutual benefit society might have on each of these elements. The activity was designed to encourage participants to think more directly about specific areas of the service, rather than broader issues such as sustainability, future control, and the need for change. Clearly these broader issues are still important determiners of the likely impact of the proposed change on specific service areas, and should not be discounted. However, the activity provided an opportunity to understand in more detail the concerns and benefits participants associated with the proposed change in delivery.

The following diagram highlights the various service areas and important elements of the libraries and archives provision. Feedback from the various groups has been combined into a single table which summarises the overarching responses from the various groups. In one group the activity was undertaken verbally rather than using written responses.

Importance table for Library and Archive services

Less Important	Quite Important	Very Important

Cafes

Clean toilets

Socialising space

Flexible opening times (evenings and weekends)

Provision of free books/ information

Provision of community information

Central point for accessing archives – open provision of archives information

Provision of information on other formats (CDs, DVDs)

Educational opportunities, training activities

Diversity of locations

Meeting point for community groups

Having expert and trained staff

Room hire

Physical access (disability access, buses, etc)

Up to date facilities

Inclusive (welcomes children, older people, etc)

Friendly atmosphere- welcoming

Accessibility - home library service, internet access, online services, range of

Community involvement/ ownership
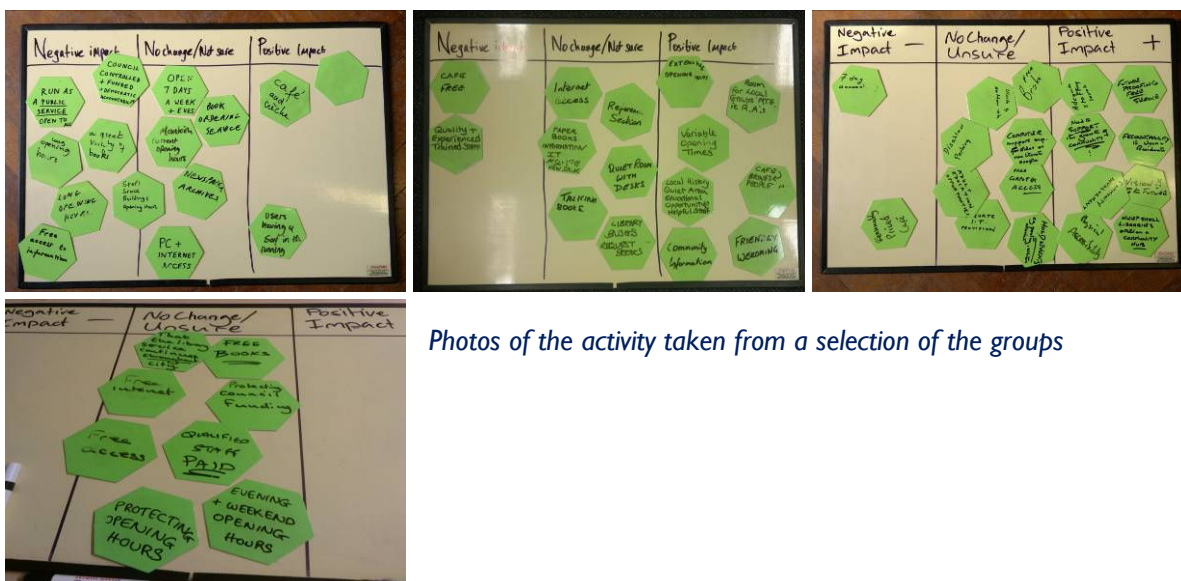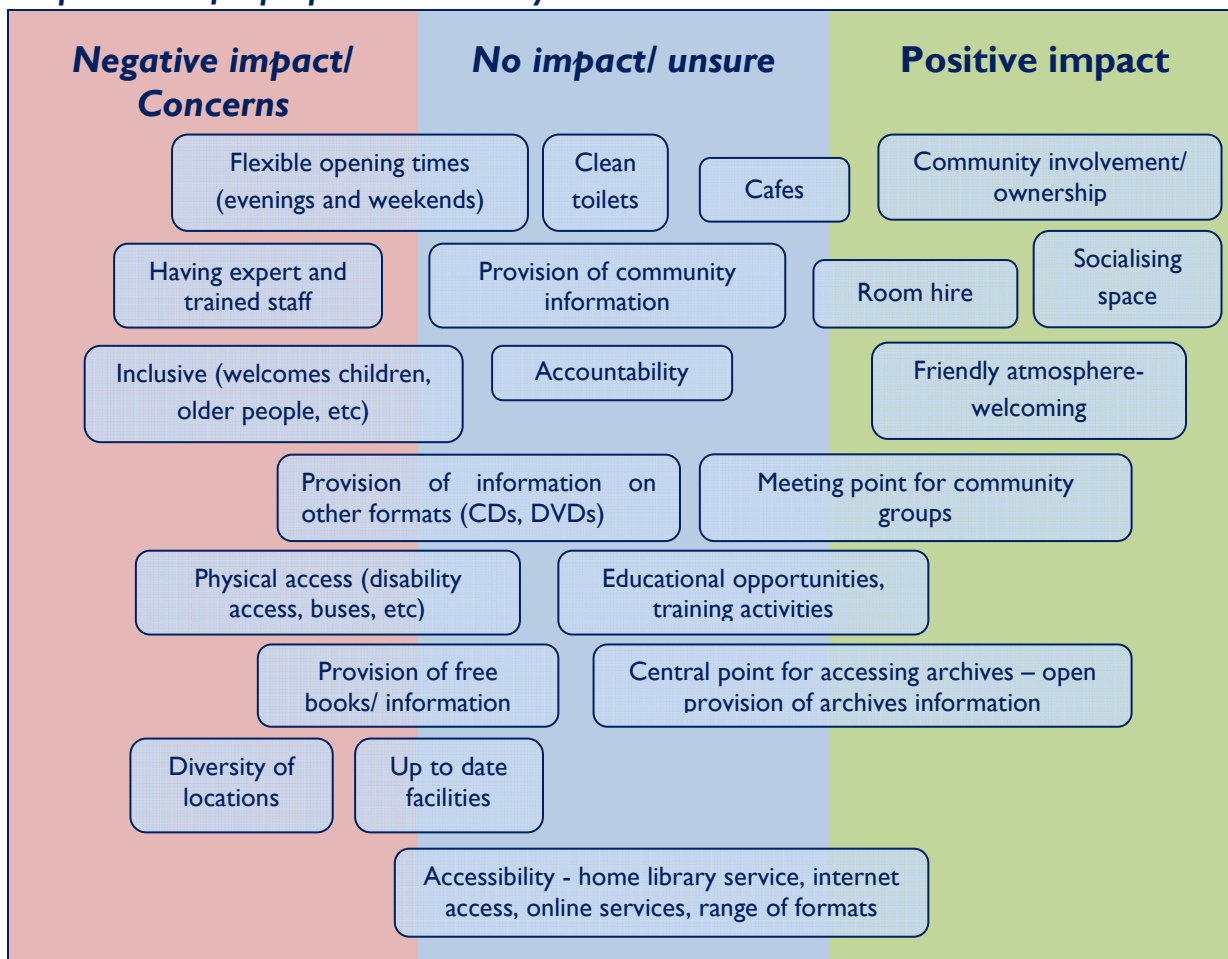
Accountability

Photos of the activity taken from a selection of the groups

There was a high degree of comparability between the responses from the various groups. As the diagram demonstrates, issues such as accessibility, free provision and staff expertise were those factors seen as being most important to the delivery of a successful library and archives service. Participants were then asked to provide an indication of how they felt each of these elements would be impacted by the proposed changes:

Impact table for proposals on Library and Archive services

Negative impact/ Concerns	No impact/ unsure	Positive impact
Flexible opening times (evenings and weekends)	Clean toilets — Cafes	Community involvement/ ownership
Having expert and trained staff	Provision of community information	Room hire — Socialising space
Inclusive (welcomes children, older people, etc)	Accountability	Friendly atmosphere- welcoming
	Provision of information on other formats (CDs, DVDs)	Meeting point for community groups
Physical access (disability access, buses, etc)	Educational opportunities, training activities	
Provision of free books/ information	Central point for accessing archives – open provision of archives information	
Diversity of locations — Up to date facilities		
	Accessibility - home library service, internet access, online services, range of formats	

Photos of the activity taken from a selection of the groups

In contrast to the previous activity there was a large degree of contrast in responses across the various groups, with respondents most likely to indicate that they were 'unsure' about the likely impact of the proposed changes on various elements of the service. In one group in particular, they did not feel there was enough 'concrete' information and as there were too many 'ifs', 'buts' and 'maybes' in the proposal and Cabinet Document, they were currently 'unsure' how all elements would be affected.

'At the moment who knows what is going to happen… without seeing the detail [I can't say].'

'I hope that us saying "unsure" is not going to be construed as meaning we don't think there will be any impacts… I am concerned about the impacts but I really don't see how we can make a judgement on [the information] we have been given… I am still not satisfied about the long term [sustainability] should this go ahead.'

Unsurprisingly, respondents who accepted the reasons given by libraries and archives for wanting to implement the proposals were more positive towards the proposed changes, and more likely to believe any impacts would most likely be positive:

'Because the new service will be run and staffed by people with a direct interest in libraries and archives affairs… then it would be run more on the basis of the knowledge of how the [service] should work rather than a bureaucratic running of the thing… I can see a benefit there in people motivated by the library ethic… Hopefully.'

This still left a sizeable group of respondents who were suspicious of the motives behind the change and still felt it was a decision driven primarily by a need to reduce resources and therefore service levels:

'You can perhaps put into your report that there is a worry about hidden agendas and there is a worry about politics having more of an influence than it appears.'

The areas where negative viewpoints dominated were those linked more explicitly to resources. In particular, areas such as having expert and trained staff, maintaining individual library locations and having extended opening times were all seen as being threatened by the new proposals by a number of individuals, despite information provided to the contrary:

'Their focusing more on volunteers, sounds like they will be trying to rely on volunteers more than proper staff. Is that the case?'

'I would be worried that in five years time, they will just take away the grant and then what happens to the small libraries?'

'There will be less money so it is inevitable that smaller libraries will have to close earlier.'

'It looks like they will be getting less money than they are from the Council at the moment, it's not clear from all this where the extra money is coming from so something has to give.'

Despite much of the information provided by libraries and archives being designed to reassure individuals on these points, there was still concern among many respondents about the impact the changes will have on service levels. As mentioned earlier, for those respondents with strong

concerns about the changes, in many cases their concerns were driven by a sense that the new delivery model would enable the Council to reduce the level of resources given to libraries and archives. For those individuals who were more accepting of the fact that resources are going to be reduced regardless, they were more likely to see the changes as a way to maintain service levels in the face of budgetary pressures:

'The local library can open when it suits local people so [the flexibility of] opening times should get better you would think.'

Areas where respondents generally perceived there would be a positive change included community involvement and the usage of the library space. Respondents were particularly keen on the idea that the new society would increase the sense of ownership among communities for their library services:

'It puts the emphasis on us to get involved… If people can see what they are getting they would be more likely to help out.'

Summary

Specific areas of the service that respondents perceived as being negatively impacted by the proposed changes had a tendency to be those related to resources, such as smaller libraries remaining open and a commitment to maintaining levels of trained and experienced staff.

Future accountability was also a concern for respondents but became less of a worry when respondents realised that the Council would still have a degree of oversight via a service level agreement or contract.

Those areas where respondents were more positive included the potential for involving local communities and given users a sense of ownership over their library and archives service.

However the overwhelming perception among respondents was one of uncertainty about the impact of the changes that might occur.

4.4   Final reactions and potential for future involvement

Towards the end of the groups respondents were asked to indicate whether their attitudes towards the proposals had shifted over the course of the session. Whilst there were still a sizeable number of respondents who maintained their concern over a move to the new scheme, there was a tendency for a softening of attitudes at the end of the groups compared to the start in the majority of cases:

> *'If they can deliver what they say they can and if this is the best way to maintain the service we have then [I'm happy]… but they have to be very careful about what happens in the long term… about what happens to the assets and what happens to staff… once it's made you can't go back again.'*

> *'This idea of us being able to have a say in how it is run I'm very positive about that could be a real change for the better.'*

> *'I understand the degree to which Councils are under pressure to make savings and I worry about the way in which they apply these savings… therefore if there is a move to extract direct control and put the [experts] in charge I think that's a positive move and even if there is a reduction in [resources] available I think that could be offset by the other elements I have been talking about.'*

For those respondents who were concerned about the changes, there was still a strong feeling of uncertainty about why this change needed to be implemented to achieve the benefits laid out by libraries and archives. They felt the information they had been given still hadn't addressed this point and as such could did not understand why the service should risk being put through this change for benefits that might be achieved anyway. The more detailed discussions about the new scheme had done little to dispel this feeling.

> *'After all this I don't know why they can't just keep things the same.'*

> *'All depends on the choice, if it is between this and libraries closing then I would go for this of course, but then why can't they keep libraries open and make the changes in flexibility and everything else they say they need.'*

> *'It sounds wonderful to be giving people lots of choice and saying here you can have a say on how the service is run… but ultimately if the politicians say "no you can't have any money" none if it matters.'*

A number of respondents were particularly vocal about the lack of information available to them about the proposed changes, and felt that the Council could be doing more to consult with residents about the proposed change and provide more information:

> *'I really don't think we have had enough information about what is going to happen… I can't feel I can comment one way or another because there are still so many questions about finance, the governance and everything else… I don't think that our questions have [been answered] so how can we say whether we are for or against it.'*

'Need more information before I could say whether it is something they should go ahead with… to be honest, this is a waste of time because there is not the information there… there needs to be somebody to answer these questions'

There was a perception among some that the consultation process stated to take place in April and May should have provided new information and a forum whereby the Council would clear up the finer details of the 'business plan'.

'We haven't actually been provided with more information [in the session] about how it's proceeding… I sort of assumed that was part of the purpose of this…we can't comment on anything because we're just sat here saying it maybe this, it maybe that, it maybe something totally different and quite frankly I'm not finding it a particularly productive use of my time.'

'This paper [Cabinet Document] is from January and the point we made before that a lot more work has been going on since January, but we don't have any of the updated information.'

Despite this many respondents were positive about the opportunities that would be available for increasing their involvement in the service, and individuals suggested that there would be a large degree of interest among residents for involvement. It should be remembered that the groups were often made of individuals who were currently large users of their library service, with a number of attendees currently volunteering for their local library, therefore it might be expected that these individuals appeared positive about the opportunity to become involved:

'I would say that yes there is certainly the demand to get involved. I would certainly become a member… [Get] involved in voting that sort of thing.'

'As you get older you start to use the library more and more… being able to do something [like get directly involved in how my library is run] really appeals to me I think it's a great idea.'

'I do have an administrative background… I might be able to contribute it would be something I would be interested in.'

A number of individuals expressed some concerns over the potential for membership to be dominated by older groups and those who might not necessarily have the interests of the wider community at heart:

'My only worry with the membership would be… it is the usual suspects that get involved… I really like the fact kids can run around, it's family friendly… with respect to [older people] if the membership is mainly older people this might change.'

[In response to a direct question on the demand for involvement from the moderator] 'Yes I think there would be demand, you can see from the fact that people come along to things like this… My only worry would be about what happens to those libraries in areas where people might not be bothered to get involved or not worry about it, would the members be as driven to go out and speak to people or just see it as their own little thing.'

Despite these concerns, the general impression from many respondents was that the chance to become more directly involved in the direction of their library and archive service was a positive development.

Summary

Respondents were generally more positive about scheme after receiving more information on how the new service would operate. However there was still a vocal group of respondents who felt they lacked the information to say whether or not they felt the change to a mutual benefit society would be beneficial, and who do not understand why any positive benefits cannot be achieved under the current model of delivery.

A number of individuals expressed consternation that the Council had not been more open about the proposed changes, and were disappointed that they had not been given the opportunity to engage directly with the Council about the changes.

In most groups there was a strong degree of interest in getting involved in the libraries and archives service.

5.   Conclusions

It should be noted that a large proportion of attendees for these focus groups consisted of individuals who were big users of the library and archives, and therefore naturally concerned about any changes that might affect what is generally seen as a good and valuable service. Compounding this was the fact that the community benefit model has not been applied to a libraries and archives elsewhere and respondents were being asked to consider something fairly novel. Most of the individuals at the group were being confronted with the proposed changes for the first time, and this has meant that many appeared (particularly at the start of the groups) to fall back on existing suspicions about transfers of delivery for public services. However, there were some consistent messages coming out of the group:

- Individuals want more clear-cut information on the proposed changes, and more information on the specifics of the change. The cabinet report provided a number of answers to people's additional queries, however this information was not widely read and respondents' felt it often just posed additional questions. Familiarising residents with the changes should be a priority. For many respondents there was an increased sense of positivity about the proposed changes once they had a chance to absorb information about the changes and discuss the changes in their group;

- However, other participants wanted to know the exact plans before they could say whether it was a positive or negative change and felt that the Council should be answering the questions and concerns that they have directly. These people were often the individuals who more hostile and suspicious about the plans, and indicated the need for more clear cut information;

- There is lack of understanding about why similar benefits can't be achieved with the service remaining part of the Council – need for specific examples of what could be achieved with the new model that can't be delivered at the moment;

- People need reassurance about the long term validity of the changes – there are particular concerns that grant money would be hard to come by and that the Council may significantly reduce resources in the future. Whilst it was emphasised that budgets can (and have been) reduced anyway there was a worry that the Council might feel more inclined to reduce grant money to an external organisation than decreasing an internal budget. There was also a concern about relying on external grants which are not guaranteed, can be hard to come by, and often have to be used for a very specific purpose;

- Linked to this were individuals' concerns regarding future staff levels and library resources, this was despite clear messages emphasising that library closures and staff reductions were not planned;

- There is a need to emphasise the continued involvement of the Council under proposals. A particular concern of respondents is that once the change is made there will be no going back, and there will be no way of changing things should the new service not work. Therefore the ongoing involvement of the Council via the monitoring of a service level agreement or contract was seen as a positive by many;

- The overarching perception among respondents is that the changes are financially motivated. Need to emphasise the potential benefits of the scheme beyond any financial motivation, particularly for increased community involvement in governance and increased local flexibility in the delivery of services. However when discussing 'community involvement' care needs to be taken not to emphasise a service that is increasingly reliant on volunteers;

- Despite all the uncertainty and potential concerns, outright hostility to the changes was rare and when given more information about the proposals a number of individuals were significantly more positive about the proposed changes as the groups progressed. The challenge for the Council is to demonstrate in a clear way many of the messages contained within the Cabinet Report and address some of the specific concerns of respondents around sustainability and the need for change.

6.   Appendix

6.1   Focus Group discussion guide

City of York Council
Researching Perceptions of proposals to change the way York Libraries and Archives are provided

Moderator:
Date:
Time:
Venue:
Number of participants:
Gender: M: F:

Thank you for coming along to this workshop.

My name is ??? I work for Qa Research, we are an independent research organisation, who have been asked by the libraries and archives service to speak to residents about proposals to change the way Libraries and Archives are provided. The Council have asked us to talk to a number of residents and users of libraries and archives to understand how people feel about the proposed changes and understand perceptions of what impact the proposals may have on libraries and archives.

The Council Cabinet has already been provided with a report which highlights the proposed changes to libraries and archives and provides reasons for the proposals and background to the changes. The next report goes to Cabinet on 4 June 2013, and the results of these workshops will be included in that report.

I don't work for the council, so you can feel free to speak openly and honestly. The report that I prepare will be anonymous – we won't use anybody's names.

A number of you may have specific questions about the changes. Whilst we will do our best to answer these questions by the end of the workshop, it may be more appropriate for us to record some of your questions and pass them back to libraries and archives who can then get back to you, as we wouldn't want to provide you with any information that is incorrect.

In order that everyone can feel comfortable to join in with the group, I would just ask that we listen to each other's point of view and take turns to speak.

The group will last for no more than 90 minutes. Because everything you say is important and I won't be able to scribble it all down, is it ok if I record the session? The audio recording will stay with my company, Qa Research, and will not be passed back to the council.

Some of you are here as individuals and others are affiliated with particular organisations and community groups. If are here to partly represent a group, we would be interested in understanding how you think your members/ stakeholders or the individuals you represent will feel about the changes, so feel free to let us know as we go through the workshop.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Interviewer note: Toilets, refreshments, fire drills, etc

Section 1: Introduction (5 minutes)

1.1   By way of introduction could we go around the table and introduce ourselves. Could you please say your name and the things you like best about York.

1.2   What would you consider to be your local library? Do you think of having a local library or do you see Libraries and Archives as a York wide service?

Section 2: Awareness (20 minutes)

We will discuss the changes in detail, but before we talk about anything else I would like to understand your awareness of the proposed changes to the libraries and archive service.

2.1   Before being asked to participate in the groups how many of you were aware of the proposals about Libraries and Archives

Interviewer note: get show of hands, note down the numbers

Prompt:
- *How were people made aware?*
- *Where are people getting there information from?*
  - *Library and Archives staff*
  - *Local media (press, radio, etc)*
  - *National media*
  - *Friends/ family*
  - *Library web site and blog*
- *Are people actively seeking information?*

2.2   At the moment do you feel you have a good understanding of the proposals? How well informed do you feel?

Activity 1

2.3   Please rate how well informed you feel on the 10 point scale. Place one of your stickers to indicate how well informed you feel:

Not very well informed	←	→	Very well informed						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Prompt:
- *Understand how important people feel it is to be kept informed of the changes. Does the Council need to actively let people know or is it up to those who use the service to find the information that is available?*
- *How should the Council make people aware of the changes that are taking place?*

2.4   How much information do you think should be communicated to people about the proposals?

Prompt:
- *What communication channels should be used? How would people prefer to be kept informed?*
- *Do you only 'need to know' if it is going to affect your own experience of the service?*
- *Are there more general points about the proposal that you would like to be told about?*
- *Do customers need to be told about how the service will be run?*
- *What questions do you have that you would really like answered?*

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Section 3: Initial reactions to the proposal (25 minutes)

Before we move onto the next section, and talk in more detail about the proposed changes. It would be really useful to get a very broad understanding of how you currently feel about the proposed changes in the service.

Activity 2

3.1   What is your first reaction to the plan – just decide according to what you think it might mean? Are you for it or against? Please place one of your stickers on the chart which best indicates how you feel:

Don't like the idea	*Like the idea*

3.2   The next thing I want to explore is your broad feelings towards the proposals. Please place up to three stickers on each of the words that best describe your current feelings towards the proposed changes:

Uneasy	Positive	Inevitable	Well thought out
Avoidable	Hesitant	Concerned	Necessary
Unclear	Opposed	Ambivalent	Rushed
Lack of transparency	Good opportunity	Apprehensive	Unsure
Support	Cautious	Beneficial	Undecided

Interviewer note: *Allow 5-10 minutes for people to record their responses then seek to understand individuals responses. If necessary, explain to respondents that at this point it doesn't matter if respondents feel they have little understanding about the changes – we are interested in the 'gut' feeling.*

Prompt:
- *Explore themes – talk about most often occurring words*
- *Understand drivers of response*
- *Link to communications/ information people have seen about the proposed changes*
- *To what extent are broader perceptions (regarding service cuts, austerity, etc) influencing individual views?*
- *What is individuals default position?*

Section 4: Discussing the proposed changes (30 minutes)

The current proposals would see Libraries and Archives become a community benefit society. This means that the day to day management and provision of Libraries and Archives would be delegated to an organisation set up specifically for this purpose. This is a type of industrial and provident society which is regulated by the Financial Services Authority and whose governance is based on a set of Rules. A particular advantage of this society is that It would be owned by staff and by the community.

The new organisation would still work in close partnership with the council as by law, the council must provide a libraries service. The council would also retain ownership of the city archives and again would delegate provision and management of the collection to the organisation.

4.1   We provided you with some information on the proposed changes for you to look through before coming along today, have any of you had a chance to read through any of this information?

4.2   I am interested in hearing your views on why you think the Council is considering these changes?

-     Do you have any thoughts on why you think the Council are looking to change the service?

Prompt for the following:
- *So the council can save money*
- *To enable the libraries and archive service to have more control*
- *To give staff more of a say*
- *To give the service more flexibility when generating income*
- *A way for the Council to reduce service levels*
- *Understand whether there is a difference in viewpoints between those that are more or less informed.*

Before we move on to the next activity, it is worth just briefly discussing some of the reasons the Council have for wanting to make the changes to the libraries and archives service, as well as responding to some of the questions that some of you posed about the changes. A full discussion on the background to the proposals and the reasons for changing libraries and archives is provided in the Report to Cabinet in January 2013, of which you have been given a copy. However, the main reasons are summarised as follows…

4.3   Did any of you have any questions about the proposals?

Interviewer note: Try and answer questions if possible. record the broad areas where individuals appear to have concerns or queries. If you are unable to answer make a note of the question and inform the Council. Let participants know that we will get back to them.

Activity 3

4.4 On the tiles provided, I would like you all to write down the things that you think libraries and archives should provide. This could be anything from simply taking out books, to accessing the internet or attending community meetings, etc. You might want to think about the specific things that you have used libraries and archives for, are more general things that you personally haven't done but you still feel should be provided or which make a good libraries and archives service (for instance accessible opening hours, wide provision of books, etc). Try and stick to one specific thing for each tile.

As you right down each element please stick it on the board in the area which corresponds to how important you think that particular element is. There are now right or wrong answers – I am just interested in your opinion.

Less Important	_Quite Important_	_Very Important_

**Interviewer note**: Allow 10 minutes for individuals to complete the task. Explore patterns in responses, and the reasons behind the various importance levels assigned. Once this has been completed, please ask participants to undertake the following.

4.5 The next thing I would like to do is understand how you think the proposed changes might affect the various ways in which libraries and archives are used. Therefore I would like you to take each tile, and place it on the following board, to show what you think the impact of the changes might be. Once everyone has had a chance to place their tiles we will have a discussion about your choices, so before placing your tile(s) try and think of the reasons leading you consider whether the impact will be positive or negative.

Negative impact	_No change/ not sure_	_Positive impact_

**Interviewer note**: Allow 5-10 minutes for people to place their tiles.

Prompt for the following:
- _The reasons leading to people making their choices;_
- _Common perceptions (or misconceptions) regarding the proposed changes;_
- _Make the link between those services that were defined as important and those where participants have particular concerns – Would participants be happy with the changes if they were assured that the elements of the service they are interested in are not affected?_

4.6 Which elements do you think are the most important parts of libraries and archives that you would be most concerned about being affected by the changes - Are there any other elements of libraries and archives that we haven't discussed that you would like to mention? What now are the words that come to mind when you think about the plan?

**Interviewer note**: dependent on responses, encourage respondents to write down responses on post it notes

Prompt:
- _This might include concerns about library closures;_
- _Worries about staff levels/ opening times;_
- _Number of books_
- _Concerns about whether or not services would have to be charged for._

Section 5: Final reactions (10 minutes)

5.1   Knowing what you know now about the proposed changes do you still have the same concerns or feelings towards the proposed changes as you had at the beginning of this workshop?

Interviewer note: show respondents original votes and word association board from activity 2.

Prompt:
- *Explore how perceptions might have changed – more or less positive*
- *Would respondents change their votes?*
- *Understand the concerns that respondents still have*

5.2   As we have mentioned, an important reason for the proposed changes to libraries and archives is that the new organisation will better able to enable local communities to have a say in how libraries and archives is run. Would any of you be interested in getting more involved in the libraries and archives if the opportunity to do so was there?

Prompt:
- *Explore general interest in getting involved – is the demand there or do people just want to stay as 'consumers' of the service;*
- *Is this perceived as a valuable element of the new proposals?*
- *Let individuals know what this involvement might mean:*
  - *Becoming an advisory group member or board member involved in the strategic direction of the community benefit society;*
  - *Becoming a more general member/ friend and having a more general say on the direction of the society;*
  - *Becoming a volunteer involved in libraries and archives or local ambassador for the service.*
- *Understand at what level people would want to get involved – how interested do participants feel that other members of their local community would be in getting involved?*
- *Would people want to get involved at a local level dealing with issues relating to their local library only? Or would you get involved with the entire service?*
- *What would drive your particular involvement?*

Interviewer note: If any respondents indicated an interest in getting involved provide details to the website and blog. Also provide libraries email if they are interested in registering interest in being considered for involvement in the new service.

5.3   Has anybody any final comments? Is there anything important we haven't covered?

Close

Thank you so much for coming along today; I hope you've enjoyed the discussion. If you think of any additional questions that we haven't had a chance to cover feel free to get in touch with me at the libraries@qaresearch.co.uk address or alternatively you can get in touch with Fiona Williams via libraries@york.gov.uk.
We will be pulling together responses from all groups and then writing a report which will go before cabinet in June. If you let me know you are interested in seeing the report, we will make you aware of when the report is released.
- *Are there more general points about the proposal that you would like to be told about?*
- *Do customers need to be told about how the service will be run?*
- *What questions do you have that you would really like answered?*

6.2   Key Messages

Policy context

Co-operative Councils Network
Localism Act 2011
Open Public Services white paper
Co-Produced Library - a partnership model with both public sector and community involvement
Right to Challenge
Cabinet Office Mutuals Support Programme

Key Messages

- No library closures
- Community owned libraries, professionally run and delivered
- Service that is enabled to be more responsive, entrepreneurial, and innovative.
- Staff and community ownership
- Supported by volunteers
- All surpluses re-invested in the service
- Council retains and oversees the statutory duty to provide comprehensive and efficient library service and retains ownership of civic archives
- Board with representatives from staff, community, and others with appropriate skills or expertise
- Advisory groups open to all in areas including learning, children, digital, equalities
- Friends groups for all local libraries and archives
- One person one vote. All over 16 may join as members
- Strong partnership with the council
- Benefits to the Council include impartiality, digital and physical infrastructure
- All services we currently provide for the council will be part of the service level agreement drawn up before handover. This will mean that both the council, and libraries and archives, have a clear view of the value of services.