

Libraries Scrutiny Review Board of the Audit, Best Value and Community Services Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Scrutiny Review Board

1. Background

1.1 The Audit, Best Value and Community Services (ABVCS) Scrutiny Committee formed a Scrutiny Review Board in September 2016 to act as a Reference Group to provide advice and challenge throughout the development of the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy (LSCS), and to ensure that proposals reflect the needs of the community.

1.2 The Review Board has commented on and made suggestions at each stage of the strategic commissioning process. Many of the Board's comments and recommendations have been taken into account during the development of the draft Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy (LSCS).

1.3 The Review Board met on 13 September 2017 having had a short period of time to consider the draft Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy. The Board welcomed the opportunity to scrutinise the proposals for the modernisation of the Library and Information Service (LIS) and stated its intention to consider a number of aspects of the draft Strategy in more detail. The Board subsequently held further meetings to consider and make recommendations on the draft LSCS.

1.4 This report details the work of the Board, which includes consideration of the evidence base for the proposed closure of the seven libraries; the cessation of the Mobile Library Service; the reduction of the Book Stock fund; consultation and community engagement; and the mitigation measures proposed as part of the Strategy. The Board met again on 5 March 2018 to consider the revised LSCS and any further comments or recommendations it wished to make to Cabinet.

2. Consultation and community engagement

2.1 A comment made in the submission of evidence from East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Councillors was that residents found the proposals contained in the draft Strategy were not easy to understand, and the consultation document was too long and complicated.

2.2 The Review Board heard evidence from officers that the consultation documents questionnaire on the draft Strategy did very clearly explain the proposals for the future Library and Information Service. It included a summary with more detailed explanations for individual questions. The various Strategy documents were structured in such a way that if people required more detail behind the proposals, this was available in the technical appendices and technical appendices summary. There was a clear explanation of the purpose of each of the documents.

Findings

2.3 *The Review Board found that the consultation documents did provide sufficient detail on the proposals for those who required it, and that summary information had also been provided so the proposals could be easily understood. The Board were impressed by the thoroughness and level of detail that was provided through the consultation documentation.*

2.4 *The Board noted the high number of responses to the consultation, and that the high level of positive responses suggested that the consultation was well understood. However, there are always lessons to be learnt about the use of technical or professional language.*

3. Number and location of libraries

Rationalisation of libraries

3.1 The Review Board notes the proposals for a smaller network of libraries. It is evident that on the whole the proposal to reconfigure the library network by closing 7 libraries is not supported by the people in the communities they serve. It heard that two proposals so far had been received to take over the running of a library. The sense was that community organisations are considering options but, understandably, awaiting the outcome of the consultation first before developing or sharing plans further.

3.2 The Review Board examined the rationale for the rationalisation of libraries in the Polegate, Willingdon, Hampden Park, Langney and Pevensy Bay area. The retention of only Hampden Park library out of the 5 libraries that serve the south Wealden/north east Eastbourne area was challenged in a number of the submissions from ESCC Councillors, as it covers areas of deprivation, housing growth and a catchment area of around 30,000 people. The Board heard evidence from Officers that the proposal to retain Hampden Park library was based on the following factors:

- The Hampden Park area has higher needs as identified by the needs assessment;
- It is the most accessible by bus and train, with reasonable travel times for users of the other local libraries;
- Hampden Park library is more adaptable and can accommodate additional services;
- The building is owned by ESCC and therefore has lower running costs; and
- It is planned to provide Rhymetime and Storytime sessions and Computer Buddy Sessions at Hampden Park to mitigate for the loss of these sessions at other libraries and in view of needs within the local area.

3.3 It was suggested by some respondents to the consultation that one or more libraries should be retained in addition to Hampden Park to serve this area due to the growth in housing. The Board heard that the Library Team had examined the impact of housing growth on library use by looking at historical data. It found library use had continued to decline despite the growth in housing. Consequently housing growth was not considered a factor that would require ESCC to retain more of the libraries. In addition the LSCS has taken into account the proposed potential housing growth in certain parts of the County, and the needs of the community in these areas could be met with the provision that had been proposed.

3.4 The Review Board heard that the provision of library facilities such as the eLibrary, Home Library Service, outreach services, and Community Library Membership will mitigate the impact of the closure of the 7 libraries, and provide alternative ways of accessing the Library and Information Service. The Review Board had previously noted the importance of the eLibrary and suggested this aspect of the Library and Information Service is promoted further.

Findings

3.5 *The Review Board considers that reasonable time should be given to allow community groups to develop viable proposals to take over the running of libraries. The Review Board welcomes the revised offer, contained in the revised LSCS, for community organisations wishing to take over the running of the libraries that are proposed for closure and in replacement of the Mobile Library Service.*

3.6 *The Review Board supports the proposal in the Strategy to promote the eLibrary (this could be done via the Parish Council network in rural areas) and other existing and new library services (e.g. through the monthly e-newsletter, outreach work and other targeted work).*

Accessibility of alternative library facilities

3.7 The Review Board examined the method used to calculate travel times, which are contained in the consultation documents. It heard that libraries are mainly open during off peak travel times and therefore the travel times had been calculated on that basis. For car journeys, large data sets of satellite navigation information were used. This was cross checked by an independent assessment carried out by people driving routes between libraries to gather real world comparison data, which confirmed the accuracy of the satellite navigation information. The journey times for bus travel were taken from current published bus timetables and are therefore accurate. Consequently the methodologies used to calculate journey times are robust and reliable.

3.8 The Review Board were told that 20-25 minutes was judged to be a reasonable travel time to an alternative library based on national research into journey times for similar purposes to visiting a library. In the case of the users of the 7 libraries proposed for closure:

- 100% were within 20 minutes travel time by car to an alternative library; and
- 96% were within 30 minutes travel time by public transport (bus or train) to an alternative library.

Findings

3.9 *The Review Board found that the travel time methodology used to calculate journey times to alternative libraries is reliable and access to alternative libraries is reasonable.*

Library running costs

3.10 The Review Board examined evidence on the running costs of the 7 libraries proposed for closure. It heard that the costs provided in the consultation were accurate, and these were the savings that would be realised if the libraries were to be closed. The costs were also provided as an illustration of the likely running costs for community groups who may be interested in taking over the running of the library.

3.11 It was acknowledged that there may be a level of discretion on some categories of expenditure such as building refurbishment, staffing and staff management if libraries are community-run, in the event that there was a recommendation to Cabinet not to retain a library, and this recommendation was agreed by Cabinet. Under these circumstances community groups may choose to vary the levels of expenditure they think necessary when building a business case for such a scenario (e.g. if they chose to run the library with volunteers instead of paid staff).

3.12 The Board noted the requests to support community organisations who wish to take over the running of libraries by providing transitional funding, partnership funding or other support such as access to the library catalogue system.

Findings

3.13 *The Board found that the running costs as provided in the consultation documents were a fair reflection of the full running costs to the Council of operating the libraries proposed for closure.*

3.14 *It also found that it would be helpful if the Council could provide support to community groups interested in taking over the running of libraries.*

Recommendations

3.15 In supporting the rationalisation of the library network, the Board recommends:

- ***Reasonable time is given to allow community groups to develop proposals to take over the running of libraries, and for other community based library services to be established; and***
- ***Consideration is given to the provision of support in kind for community run library services, and welcomes the further support for groups who wish to take over the running of libraries.***

4. Book Stock Fund

4.1 The Review Board examined the levels of expenditure and the changes that had taken place in the Book Stock Fund over the last 8 years. Some of the main trends were a decrease in spending on adult fiction and reference material, together with a rise in online resources. It is expected that spending on adult fiction and reference material will reduce further as this is replaced by more e-books and online resources. Both of these approaches are responses by the Library and Information Service to the reduction in loans for books and the increase in usage of the eLibrary, and to bring spending on stock more into line with spending by our comparator authorities.

4.2 The Review Board commented that it was crucial that the Library and Information Service has the right stock levels and asked whether stock would be unavailable to other library users if large numbers of items were taken out by volunteers and community run library services. The Board heard that the proposals for fewer libraries and the cessation of the mobile library service will release stock. Once the Library and Information Service establishes a core of online resources at the right level, it will be able to maintain services at that level.

Findings

4.3 *The Review Board found that in the context of savings, the reduction in the book stock fund is acceptable, but needs to be carefully monitored to ensure the Library and Information Service has the right stock levels.*

5. Mobile Library Service

5.1 The proposals contained in the Libraries SCS include the withdrawal of the Mobile Library Service, which provides a service to around 1% of library users, equivalent to approximately 1,100 users. All 88 stops are within a 20 minute journey time of an alternative library by car and 82 stops are served by public transport to an alternative library (76 of these are with a 30 minute journey time to an alternative library).

Mobile Library Service mitigation measures and use of volunteers

5.2 The Review Board heard that the key impacts of ceasing the Mobile Library would be on:

- People who are aged 75+ as the mobile library has more users who are elderly than other library services.
- People with disabilities
- People in rural areas who rely on others to get around.

5.3 The measures proposed in the Strategy to mitigate these impacts are:

- Enhanced provision and access to the eLibrary
- Most people live within 20-25 minute travel time of an alternative library
- Expansion of the Home Library Service
- Introduction of the Community Library Membership, which would allow communities to borrow a range of items which can be made available locally to the community within a village hall, community café or similar setting

5.4 The Review Board were assured that demand for the Home Library Service was not expected to increase significantly as a result of the proposals, but that the Service had the capacity to deal with any increase, and the Library and Information Service had received a large amount of interest in response to the consultation on the draft SCS from people wishing to consider volunteering. As the Home Library Service is volunteer-led its costs are largely around the co-ordination of volunteers and payment of their expenses and these had been included in the financial costings of the Strategy.

Findings

5.5 *The Board found that alternative service provision and in particular the Home Library Service, would help mitigate the impact of the cessation of the Mobile Library Service. It welcomed the proposed introduction of the Community Library Membership. It was encouraged by the positive response by some community organisations and believes there is an opportunity, where communities are willing to work with the Library Service, to provide a better service than the Mobile Library did.*

6. Support for Community Organisations

6.1 The Board heard evidence to suggest that community organisations were considering how they could use the Community Library Membership to set up community libraries as an alternative to the Mobile Library, and this was seen as a positive service development by those who have come forward so far.

6.2 It is important that the Library and Information Service (LIS) retains sufficient capacity to:

- provide professional support to community organisations; and
- support the enhancement of better life chances;

7. Community Information

7.1 It is important that the LIS retains the capacity to support services like East Sussex Community Information Service (ESCIS) and to signpost the opportunities for personal development.

8. Submissions from ESCC Councillors

8.1 The Review Board received and reviewed submissions from ESCC Councillors whose Divisions are affected by the proposals. ESCC Councillors spoke in support of retaining the libraries where possible, and highlighted the potential impact the proposed closures would have if they went ahead. A summary of the points raised in the submissions to the Review Board is contained in appendix 1.

8.2 The main themes that emerged in the submissions to the Review Board were:

- a) The consultation documents were too long, complicated and difficult for residents to understand and identify the proposals that related to their local library. There were also concerns that the options for responses were too restrictive and in some cases leading.
- b) The travel times to alternative library facilities were not realistic and there are other barriers to access, such as the affordability of public transport for those on low incomes and the cost/availability of parking, which have not been taken into account.
- c) Libraries should not be closed because many local communities have needs, as defined by the indices of multiple deprivation, which would be better met by retaining the local library. The local libraries provide added community value, (such as improving the life chances of people living in deprived areas, providing access to the internet, and reducing social isolation) which outweigh the relatively modest cost of keeping these libraries open.
- d) If the decision is taken to close libraries, then enough time should be allowed for communities to work up business cases to take over the running of their local library.

8.3 The Board has considered in detail the needs assessment and endorsed the strategic outcomes of the Strategy. It has examined the evidence regarding the accessibility of alternative libraries and library facilities, and considers the consultation documents were clear and provided sufficient information on the proposals for the Library and Information Service. It supports the request to give community organisations enough time and support to bring forward proposals for community run libraries and community based library services.

9. Summary comments

9.1 The Review Board supports the vision and strategic outcomes contained within the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy (LSCS) as the basis for the delivery of a comprehensive and efficient Library and Information Service fit for the future.

9.2 The Review Board considers it is important to take into account the positive developments and new services contained within the Strategy, as well as the impacts of the proposed reduction in the size of the library network and the cessation of the Mobile Library Service.

9.3 Going forward, the ABVCS Scrutiny Committee will wish to continue to monitor the implementation of the LSCS once it has been agreed, together with the mitigation measures contained within the Strategy.

Review Board Members (May 2017 to date):

Councillor Colin Swansborough (Chair)
Councillor John Barnes
Councillor Peter Pragnell
Councillor Richard Stogdon

Witnesses providing evidence:

Councillor Bill Bentley, Lead Member for Communities and Safety
Councillor Philip Daniel, Ringmer and Lewes Bridge
Councillor Tom Liddiard, Pevensey and Stone Cross
Councillor Laurie Loe, Hastings – Baird and Ore
Councillor Daniel Shing, Polegate and Watermill
Councillor Stephen Shing, Willingdon and South Downs
Councillor Alan Shuttleworth, Eastbourne - Langney
Councillor Rupert Simmonds, Heathfield and Mayfield

Assistance to the Review Board was provided by:

Nick Skelton, Assistant Director Communities
Stephen Potter, Head of Customer and Library Services
Rhona Drever, Team Manager - Library Strategy and Performance
Matt Wragg, Project Manager – Strategic Commissioning
Katherine Emery, Project Manager – Strategic Commissioning

Library Review Board dates:

13 September 2017
16 November 2017
12 January 2018
5 March 2018

Appendix 1

Summary of points raised in submissions from ESCC Councillors affected by the proposed library closures (Langney, Mayfield, Ore, Pevensey Bay, Polegate, Ringmer and Willingdon)

Councillors spoke in support of their local libraries and outlined the views of the local community who, on the whole, did not agree that their local library should be closed.

Public consultation

- The consultation documents were lengthy (over 300 pages) and difficult to understand, especially if you are only interested in what is proposed for your local library rather than the countywide Library Service.
- Some residents felt the questions were too restrictive in the responses you could give and some were leading.

Travel times and accessibility of alternative libraries

- The travel times to alternative libraries by car and public transport (bus/train) were inaccurate and journeys take longer than the consultation documents describe. Journey times to not take into account;
 - waiting times for public transport;
 - the time it may take to get to the bus stop or train station;
 - physical barriers to using public transport (e.g. buses not accessible if you need to use a mobility scooter);
 - the cost of public transport especially for those on low incomes, or where the whole family would need to travel;
 - parking costs, the proximity and availability of parking. Libraries are only open during peak hours when most town centre car parks are full, and may be some distance away from the library adding to travel times.
- It is inaccurate to assume that it is possible to combine visits to the library with journeys for other purposes such as shopping, especially for parents of young children who may have buggies or shopping to carry.
- The additional cost of travelling to an alternative library may be prohibitive for those on low incomes, and may particularly affect families with young children due to the number of fares.
- The increased cost of concessionary fares that would be used to get to alternative libraries has not been taken into account.

Needs assessment

- The libraries in areas of need, or ones that serve adjacent areas of need, according to the indices of multiple deprivation should not be closed, as they offer people the resources to improve their life chances through:
 - improved literacy,
 - training,
 - access to ICT; and
 - access to the internet (used for job search/applications, Universal credit applications etc.).

- The value of the savings that would be achieved by closing libraries is relatively small and is outweighed by the benefits of keeping them open in terms of community resilience, access to services, reduction in social isolation and improvement of life chances. Therefore the libraries should be kept open and savings found from elsewhere (e.g. use of volunteers, use of Section 106 Planning agreement funds; combining libraries and using capital receipts; savings from other council budgets).
- The library usage figures have been affected by the reduction in library opening hours and temporary closures, which will have affected the needs analysis if these factors were not taken into account.
- The local library facilities at Polegate and Willingdon are better than those provided at Hampden Park library which it is proposed to retain (e.g. better parking and disabled parking outside the library; provision of Storytime and Rhyme time sessions etc.), and therefore they should not be closed.
- In South Wealden there will be a catchment area of around 30,000 people who will not have a local library if the closures going ahead, which is also an area of housing growth.
- Residents in the Pevensey and Stone Cross Division are more significantly affected as they use 4 out of the 7 libraries proposed for closure.

Support for community organisations interested in taking over the running of libraries if the decision is taken to close the 7 libraries

- There is no offer of partnership funding from ESCC to pay some of the ongoing costs, or transitional funding for community organisations to use to take over the running of the libraries.
- Community organisations will need more time to develop their proposals or business cases to take over the libraries, and the closure of the libraries should be delayed to allow sufficient time for this to take place.
- Management overhead costs and building refurbishment costs contained in the consultation documents are inaccurate and unrealistic.
- There are no details of the support services available that community organisations could receive/buy into such as the library catalogue system, access to book stock etc.

Other issues

- Mitigation measures such as the proposal to provide outreach in Children's Centres is dependent on them remaining open in the future.
- Work to support children's literacy and schools is undermined by the reduction in the Schools Library and Museum Service (SLAMS).