



AGENDA ITEM NO: 10

DUNDRY VIEW NEIGHBOURHOOD PARTNERSHIP

15th December 2014

Report of: Bristol Libraries Service, Neighbourhoods
Title: Libraries Consultation

Officer presenting report: Di Robinson

Recommendation:

- a) This report is for information and discussion purposes only.

1. The proposal:

1.1 The context for change: - the “story”

There is a large scale debate happening across the UK and worldwide about the how libraries need to develop in the future. The debate is often centred on how to ensure that a 20th Century model of provision can be relevant and important in the context of the 21st century. The debate is being led in the UK by key national institutions such as Arts Council England, the Carnegie Trust UK, and the Society of Chief Librarians, and all over the country, Local Authorities are trying to understand how they can provide an inclusive, responsive library service in the context of both changing customer needs and expectations and significant funding challenges. Fundamentally, what everyone is wrestling with is how to keep the heart of what is great about our existing library models while developing a new and sensitive way to deliver against the challenges of a radically changing environment.

When Andrew Carnegie made grants to libraries at the start of the 20th century, he described them as “instruments for the elevation of the masses of the people’. They were seen as providing access to learning and advancement for people who would otherwise have limited opportunities for education or self-improvement. Their purpose was

clearly educational, and they were open to everyone in a community who wanted access to books and to learning. Our Bristol public libraries retain these characteristics today. After 400 years of delivery they provide a universal service open to all through a network of 28 libraries, and they provide access to books and learning in traditional settings, although increasingly in alternative formats, using information technology (e.g.: eBooks and the 24 hour digital library).

The libraries in Bristol are well-loved and highly valued by those that use them, and often even those who do not use them are very vocal in their support. However, the challenge in Bristol is that despite this level of value, the numbers of people actively using our libraries for their traditional purpose is very low. Our “universal” service currently serves 5.6% of our citizens, (the measure is how many people use any part of the “lending service” more than once in a 3 month period). There are many different ways of measuring who uses a library and why, however the key point is that our levels of usage is telling us that what we provide in many of our libraries is not relevant to the vast majority of our citizens. This situation is common across the country which is why the national debates are so important in terms of informing our local thinking and how we begin to put together a future shape for the service. Our current service cannot provide the quality that meets our aspirations for the city, so keeping everything the same is not an option.

It is important within this context to acknowledge how passionately people feel about libraries and how contentious attempting any level of significant change is likely to be. The service is much valued by the people who use it and communities also feel strongly about the library’s place in their community and how it reflects council investment in each location. What we want to achieve in Bristol is a vibrant and sustainable network of libraries which will better respond to the needs of more of our citizens and provide additional and relevant services to communities, particularly those in our city who experience more challenges and have less access to opportunities.

We believe that there should continue to be a universal core offer across the city, but one which can be enhanced or developed to recognise that not all communities want to or can access the traditional model - different communities have different needs. We want to reach a set of proposals for future library provision through a well informed and evidenced public consultation, where we share all that we know about our current libraries and their usage, and which opens the opportunity to

a wide range of citizens and stakeholders to engage in the debate about the future service:

- what's great about what they deliver now;
- what extra or different could they deliver;
- what's important about where they are located; are they where they should be;
- what's a reasonable distance to travel to a library;
- how they could develop to use new technology & increase digital access;
- how could they become improved and flexible community spaces;
- what new activities could they deliver;
- what might the best models of delivery be for different parts of the city with different community needs.

This consultation needs to hear the voices of our committed and our occasional service users, our professional and dedicated staff, those who might use a different type of service, and other partners and stakeholders who might want to work alongside our library network to deliver additional opportunities or services to benefit our city's communities.

We have never had this whole city debate before. Bristol City Council is very clear about its' duty both from a statutory perspective regarding the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service, which sits at the heart of the 1964 Libraries and Museums Act – and also from a moral perspective, respecting and valuing the importance of effective library provision. We are also clear that Full Council approved a budget in February 2014 which included a £1.1 million reduction from the revenue budget through redesign of library services. At this point the expectation is that £1.1 million will come from the library revenue budget. However depending on how we move forward after the consultation, the implementation of the future shape of the service may result in this saving being realised across several council departments.

However, it is important that this opportunity to have a conversation as a city is not only dominated by the budget reduction. We need to have a conversation which helps us evidence what our communities want and need from libraries, which helps us spot opportunities with partners and communities for developing new approaches which will offer more or different rather than less, and have an open debate about what is possible.