

Oxfordshire County Council Library Service Consultation

Executive Summary of the public consultation

Prepared by CIPFA Social Research for Oxfordshire County Council

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BACKGROUND

Oxfordshire County Council (hereafter referred to as OCC) has identified that it needs to find savings of £119 million by 2014/15 due to the reduction in funding that it now receives from central government. The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 places a statutory duty on OCC to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service'. Therefore, with the legal and customer requirements in mind, OCC undertook a 'zero-based' quantitative analysis of library requirements¹. This entailed OCC considering the criteria it would use for the service if it were starting entirely from scratch and then applying these criteria to the current library network. The criteria used were that ideal libraries would be located in areas where the most people already **lived, worked, studied, shopped** and **travelled**. The results of this analysis were used to shape and assess the proposals to develop the library service.

For each existing library site, OCC drew a circle around a **½ mile radius**, and assessed how many people lived/worked/studied/shopped in that area and how accessible the site was by public transport. Each library was then allocated a score of between 1 and 100 according to its potential usage. The analysis was then 'sense checked' to see if there were any significant variations if, for example, the criteria were changed to a mile or the results were tested against current usage. OCC reported that none of these factors materially changed the results.

As a result, libraries were clustered into **5 groups**, each sharing similar characteristics and scores. Group 1 and 2 libraries were defined as **core** libraries; those in group 3 were classed as **community plus** libraries, and libraries in groups 4 and 5 were named as **community libraries**.

¹ In addition to the zero-based analysis, OCC also considered key information, such as its current strategic approach to the library service, an audit of the current library service and activities, customer feedback (e.g. collected through the recent Public Library Users Survey and Children's Plus Survey), existing user demand and national studies and reports etc.

THE CONSULTATION

Between 27th May and 30th September 2011, OCC undertook a large-scale consultation on its proposal for the Oxfordshire library service. The consultation process was launched in the media, on the county council website, via digital channels and direct communications sent to a variety of stakeholders including councillors, library friends / campaign groups and local councils.

This process consisted of a consultation document and feedback form. Both full and easy read versions were available in hard copy in all libraries and other council buildings and on a special portal set up on the county council's website. The web portal had three main sections: proposal, supporting information and 'how to have your say'. The content of the portal along with the information provided to libraries was updated throughout the consultation period.

Other feedback channels were provided to enable as many people as possible to have their say. These included providing a special Freepost address, email address and support to people who asked for help with the consultation. In addition, senior representatives from the council participated in locally organised public meetings on request and attended many meetings with friends / campaign groups, Parish and Town Councils and other stakeholders.

The core elements of the proposal as set out in the consultation document were for OCC to:

- Rationalise management support
- Expand the use of volunteers
- Assess the current procurement arrangements
- Continue to exploit existing and new opportunities to generate income
- Work collaboratively with other service providers such as University of Oxford, voluntary and community organisations

- Work collaboratively with private sector developers and businesses to address changes in future population
- Continue to work with other library authorities to ensure that the library service benefits from best practice and opportunities to review and develop services

Under the proposal from OCC, **all** libraries will:

- Have a good book stock, public access computers and online resources
- Be cost-effective and efficient
- Have self-service as standard
- Have tailored opening hours
- Offer a broad range of supporting services tailored to the community – e.g. book clubs
- Work closely with a community support network (e.g. friends / campaign groups)
- Encourage use of library buildings as community space

Overall, the breakdown of response to the consultation was as follows:

- **4,731** feedback form responses
- **204** emails and letters from members of the public
- **30** detailed submissions from library friends / campaign groups and notes taken from consultation meetings and stakeholder meetings
- **25** submissions from key stakeholders e.g. MPs, Parish & Town Councils etc.

In October 2011, CIPFA Social Research was commissioned to undertake an independent analysis of all consultation feedback. Our analysis and interpretation of the feedback is included within this report provided to Oxfordshire County Council (OCC).

PART 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Key messages arising from the feedback forms – ordered by the number of mentions

- Resounding agreement with OCC's decision to keep all libraries open
- More respondents tended to agree rather than disagree with the council's proposal for the future of the library service
- Of the two methods of response provided, more people responded on the paper copy of the questionnaire than did so online. In some cases the differences between how these two groups answered was quite pronounced
- A small number of responses came from those living outside the county of Oxfordshire. More interestingly there appears to be a low take up of the survey amongst resident / library users in Cherwell, but a high level of response from those in South Oxfordshire, compared to general population figures. Generally (although not exclusively) the pattern of response appears to be dictated by where libraries are subject to the changes in staffing
- When asked whether they had an alternative plan, most respondents did not. Of those that did propose an alternative scheme, this was generally either: to reduce library opening hours, or to spread the cuts across the entire service. Other suggestions included raising the local parish precept
- The majority of respondents (62%) stated that they do not wish to volunteer. Furthermore, there appears to be a mismatch between the areas where volunteering is required and where it has been offered
- Marginally more survey respondents did not wish to join a friend's group than did. Interestingly, amongst those that did wish to join a friend's group, a higher proportion did not want to volunteer compared to those that did. Geographically, friend's groups appeared to be more popular where libraries have been designated as needing to provide a higher level of volunteers

2. Key themes from the qualitative comments in emails and letters – ordered by the number of mentions

- The service should be retained as it is
- Rural libraries have been treated unfairly in the proposal
- General disagreement with the proposal from OCC
- Do not replace experienced staff with volunteers
- Concern that will not be able to recruit the required number of volunteers
- Methodology chosen (zero-based analysis and ½ mile radius) pre-determines the outcome of the analysis
- Use volunteers to enhance services or solely in larger / urban libraries
- Like that all libraries are to remain open
- Make cuts across all libraries
- Consider sharing services (*back office*) with other authorities
- Introduction of coffee shops
- The introduction of volunteers will lead to the downgrading of the service

3. High level summary of the detailed submissions – ordered by the number of mentions

- Do not replace paid experienced staff with volunteers
- Concern that libraries will not be able to recruit the required number of volunteers
- Methodology chosen to group libraries is biased against rural libraries – and there was no analysis in the consultation document of contribution of rural (particularly 'hub') libraries to their communities
- Those that are willing to volunteer already do so (often for several organisations) – risk of reaching 'volunteer saturation point'
- Why was only one proposal put forward, rather than several options from which to choose?
- Concern that library friends groups are being expected to recruit and maintain volunteers

The following are the **key suggestions** from friends / campaign groups, ordered by the number of mentions

- Make cuts across all libraries

- Library managers to work across libraries
- OCC to produce a contingency plan in the event that not enough volunteers are recruited
- Share back office or full service functions with other authorities

The following are some **suggestions** as to how libraries can increase revenue

- Provide advertising panels for local businesses to display information
- Share library premises with other organisations, such as the post office.