

Proposed changes to the library service

High Level Summary of the pre-consultation feedback

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This short report summarises the key themes arising from feedback on the council's 'early' proposals for Oxfordshire's library service announced in November 2010. The proposals were communicated via a letter from the County Librarian, which was made available in all libraries and on the county council website. The proposals were also included in the Social & Community Services Business Strategy 2011/12 – 201/15.
- 1.2 The council welcomed 'pre-consultation' feedback on these early proposals and made dedicated channels available for people to do so. These included a regularly monitored email account (futurelibraries@oxfordshire.gov.uk), a Freepost Address (FUTURE LIBRARIES, FREEPOST OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL) and comments cards in libraries. All correspondence submitted to these channels has been acknowledged.
- 1.3 In addition to the above, residents and stakeholders also expressed their views on the early proposals for the library service using a wide variety of other channels including: sending letters to their local councillor, senior council officers, MPs, etc.; petitions; addressing formal council meetings; holding demonstrations; having debates at locally organised public meetings (which the council was invited to attend/address); organising classroom activities, e.g. book cover drawings; blogging etc.
- 1.4 In total, over 1,570 feedback records have been recorded with some individual records representing batches of 'petition-style' responses sent by hundreds of people. Communications recorded by the council include comments, questions and requests for detailed information to which the council has endeavoured to respond.

2. Feedback

- 2.1 The feedback received by the council focused primarily on 'saving' individual libraries and other resources associated with them (e.g. the Turrill Sculpture Garden in Summertown), with strong feelings and emotions being expressed. Overall, people, regardless of current use of the library service, tended to praise the current library service, both its staff and ethos. The responses set out a very strong view of the library service as being well-used and liked by the public.

Theme: Community Hubs

- 2.2 The feedback indicated that, for many people, libraries have a valued role in their local community, for example as a meeting place. For some, they were seen as supportive of social cohesion; for others they were seen as improving the quality of life or as supportive of local economic prosperity, especially in areas where other local community facilities such as shops and Post Offices had recently closed.

Theme: Impact on Individuals/Groups

2.3 A large number of responses raised concerns about the impact of early proposals on different groups of people in their community. Overall, there was a concern that library closures 'will unfairly affect the poor, rural and vulnerable', with the following groups of people being specifically identified:

- Elderly and frail
- Disabled – especially those with restricted mobility
- Children, mostly young children but those in primary and secondary schools
- Young families
- Travellers
- Unemployed and 'unskilled'
- People on a low income

2.4 The reasons given for this, that were common across most groups were:

- **Transport/Access to services** – perceptions regarding 'poor bus services' in rural areas and the cost, time and distance involved in travelling to other libraries - seen as causing particular inconvenience to parents with young children, the elderly and those with restricted mobility, as well as increasing costs to the council through greater use of concessionary passes. Also several references to use of cars, the high cost of petrol, beliefs that is not 'a green solution to encourage travelling'. Several responses mentioned that it is perceived that current library users would not use the service, because they would not/could not make the journey to another library.
- **Social isolation** – removal of meeting place, part of a regular routine and access to the internet, with particular impact on the elderly and other vulnerable members of society.
- **Economic disadvantage** – the possible impact of the increased costs for young children and the elderly with regard to buying books and audio books and the potential costs of travel, etc.
- **Academic results and literary standards** – impacts regarding removal of access to computers and the internet for those without their own computer.

Theme: Library Staff

2.5 The value of library staff is clearly expressed in the feedback, in particular, the community role of librarians, their long-standing relationships with individuals and families, their dedication to the service and their professional skills.

Theme: Community Libraries

2.6 The feedback indicated that there is perception amongst some that community-run means 'run only by volunteers'. Many of these responses expressed views that using volunteers to run libraries is unrealistic and/or unsustainable.

Theme: Avoiding Total Closure

- 2.7 Many pieces of correspondence offered a range of ideas and suggestions for the county council to explore in the hope that this would prevent total closure. People seemed more willing to accept the idea of a community-run facility than total closure.

3. Ideas for a Future Library Service

- 3.1 In addition, this early feedback provided a wealth of insight into community views on a future library service. Comments included:

Suggestions regarding opening hours

- reduce opening hours of all libraries
- offer alternative opening hours

Some suggestions on how the service might raise revenue

- eBooks and ereaders are cheaper alternatives
- coffee bars in the library
- reduction in purchase of books and periodicals
- pay more council tax to keep it open
- subscription service
- raising fees
- nominal charge for borrowing
- use premises to run classes or other services

Suggestion of how the service might integrate with other local services

- school libraries included in intra library loans service to extend range of school libraries
- co-location of a library with a school

4. Summary

- 4.1 The council has listened to the support that has been voiced for the Oxfordshire Library Service since the announcement of the early proposals. This feedback has been taken into account by the council when refining its proposal for formal consultation and preparing the accompanying initial Service & Community Impact Assessment.

May 2011