



Leicester  
City Council

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD  
CABINET**

**10 April 2008  
12 May 2008**

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**Report of the Culture & Leisure Scrutiny Task Group – Final Report  
“Libraries Service Strategic Review”**

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**Report of Councillor Naylor, Task Group Leader**

**1. Summary**

- 1.1 The Libraries Service has carried out a high level strategic review to set the priorities and direction of the service for the next 5-10 years to achieve continued improvement in service quality, performance and delivery to city residents.
- 1.2. The Libraries Review Scrutiny Task Group was set up to ensure that the strategic review delivers the best options for the city.
- 1.3. This report sets out the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Libraries Scrutiny Review Task and Finish group. This was the Culture & Leisure Scrutiny Task Group’s first review topic.

**2. Recommendations**

- 2.1. It is recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board endorse the report and that the following recommendations are forwarded to Cabinet for consideration:
  - 2.1.1 Serious consideration to be given to investing in the library buildings. The state of some of the buildings visited was found to be poor and in decline in the upkeep.
  - 2.1.2 That improvements are made to the external and internal signage, the image and the general appearance of libraries.
  - 2.1.3 Environmental improvements to be made in the area surrounding library venues, task group members request for these to be prioritised. During site visits the common complaints related to litter, graffiti and dullness.

- 2.1.4 The task group considered that the central lending library and the reference library should be combined under one roof and in order to make it more attractive and modern it should be relocated to another part of the city centre. However, it is recognised that this would be a long-term goal and therefore the task group would recommend that a feasibility study to look into the options for relocation be carried out.
- 2.1.5 That consideration be given to an increase in the investment of book stock, especially in the libraries that are well used. Insufficient book stock was an issue in many of the libraries visited and there is definitely a need for more up-to-date books.
- 2.1.6 A future consideration for the re-branding of libraries to more adequately reflect the modern service that was offered. There was some discussion as to possible options and it was agreed that wider consultation would be needed, however initial suggestions included “Libraries and Learning Centres”, “Libraries and Learning Zones” and “Libraries and Learning”.
- 2.1.7 That consideration should be given to investing in more technology. It was noted that computing was very popular in all libraries and requests had been made for investment in more technology to meet the demand. Caution was expressed however, in that some libraries did not have room to accommodate any more computers, and also that an increase in the number of computers would result in less room for books.
- 2.1.8 That the soft furnishings, furniture and chairs in some libraries were in a poor state of repair and dated, these should be replaced. An investment to replace these with modern pieces should be considered.
- 2.1.9 Members suggested that the library user guides be improved and colour coded for ease of access around a library. In particular, the layout maps need to be more visible, user-friendly and placed in a prominent position in the library venues.
- 2.1.10 Members also discussed the Council Book Buses in relation to the image and attraction to young users and it was felt that the standard Council yellow vans were unlikely to prove sufficiently inviting for young people.
- 2.1.11 That investment was needed to improve access to libraries, in particular extending opening times in libraries where demand is high.
- 2.1.12 That the Libraries Review Task Group supports the Libraries Service to set the priorities and direction for the next 5-10 years.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1. At its meeting in August 2007 the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board agreed that the first Review of the Culture & Leisure Task Group be on the Libraries Service. It was agreed that the review would cover library provision in the city, contribute to and support the current 'Libraries Services Strategic Review'.
- 3.2. In an initial meeting, the task group discussed and agreed the terms of reference for the purpose of the review, **APPENDIX A**
- 3.3. The Task Group met on 5 occasions during the period from August 07 to January 08.
- 3.4. A progress report to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board in November 2007 provided an update of the Task Group's work.

### **4. Membership of the Task and Finish Review Group**

- 4.1. The members involved in the Task Group were: Councillors Allen, Blower, Johnson, Newcombe, Shah, Thomas, Westley and Naylor as the Task Group Leader.
- 4.2. The Officers from the Regeneration & Culture Department involved in this review are: Richard Watson – Service Director & Patricia Flynn – Head of Library Services.

### **5. Acknowledgements**

- 5.1. The Task Group wishes to thank the staff at the 8 library venues visited: Belgrave, Beaumont Leys, Hamilton, St. Barnabas, Westcotes, Aylestone, Evington and the Central Lending Library.

### **6. Aim of the Review**

- a) To influence and add value to the current strategic libraries service review.
- b) To engage in the process of developing the libraries strategy to ensure that it will deliver improvements for Leicester people.
- c) To maintain an overview of general issues concerning libraries provision in the city.
- d) To ensure that the long-term libraries strategy aims to widen public participation.

## 7. Method of Investigation

7.1 The Task Group gathered its evidence through the following methods:-

- a) A Presentation on the Vision of the Library Service
- b) A Presentation on the Libraries Service Strategic Review
- c) An information Pack on all aspects of the current Library Service including budget, staffing and financial issues.
- d) 8 Library Site Visits
- e) Library User & Non-User Surveys
- f) The knowledge and experience of the Task group members.

## 8. Findings

### 8.1 Library Site Visits

The Task Group adopted a hands-on approach and collected evidence by visiting 8 out of the 16 Library venues in the City. On some visits, the members acted as mystery customers to measure the service received. Task Group members recorded their findings by filling in a questionnaire for each visit. The detailed findings from all 8 Library visits have been captured and recorded in a table format document 'Analysis of Library Site Visits', **APPENDIX B**

These are the key findings of the library visits:

#### a) Book Stock

The insufficient book stock was apparent in some of the venues visited; there is a need to replace old books for up-to-date new books. Members felt that more investment should be made into the book stock.

Some libraries had very good eye-catching displays to promote books and tied these in with events in the calendar e.g. Diwali, Christmas, but some libraries needed to make more effort to refresh and change the displays regularly and make them more interesting.

#### b) Buildings

The site visits highlighted that the older library buildings are in need of attention in terms of maintenance, refurbishment, redecoration and general upkeep.

The furnishing, lighting and flooring in some libraries was outdated and needed replacing.

The task group agree that some improvements have been made to modernise the library service by way of refurbishments and the creation of new library buildings in the city such as in Braunstone and in Hamilton, which was rated good to excellent.

The task group also recognised that the location of some libraries in listed buildings, such as Aylestone and the Central Lending Library has restricted the modernisation of the library service and the space available. However, the first impressions of a library are very important if we want to increase the number of users.

Each neighbourhood across the city has different requirements in terms of service provision and the task group recognised that 'one size does not fit all' when it comes to planning new libraries.

c) Signage inside and outside

The first impression of a library is drawn from the ease at which it can be accessed and used. This review found that a lack of good external signage was an issue in several of the locations visited, such as St Barnabas, Beaumont Leys and Central Lending. Internal signage was much better, apart from the map layouts at Beaumont Leys and St. Barnabas, which need to be more prominently placed.

It was also noted that Belgrave Library was very attractive on the inside, but Members questioned if more could be done to make the external image more appealing and inviting to members of the public.

d) Activities for local people

The importance of library facilities was particularly evident in some areas like Hamilton, Evington and Belgrave where the libraries provide so much more than book lending, acting as community focal points where people meet, carry out learning, access the internet and get help and advice with the completion of forms.

8.2 Following the site visits, the Task Group met to discuss the emerging issues based on their observations. These were recorded in a workshop setting where the Task Group members identified the strengths and weaknesses of the library service as they experienced it through their site visits, key points raised:

(i) The strengths:

- Councillors have had a very positive experience at every library visit. This is because of the welcoming, helpful, knowledgeable and committed staff who are a major asset to this service;
- Some libraries are very well used with lots of different people and activities taking place (parent & toddler sessions, after school study support etc.).
- There is an excellent range of online services provided free of charge through libraries.

(ii) The weaknesses:

- The book stock sometimes appears to be out of date and there are not enough copies to meet demand.
- Many of the buildings are in poor physical condition and some lack basic facilities – such as toilets and disabled access.

- The demand for computer/internet usage exceeds supply at certain times and there is scope for further E-transformation.

### 8.3 Library User / Non-User Survey 2007

The Task Group gathered evidence on the views of Leicester residents through a survey of library users and non-users, this was launched in October 2007 by the Task Group Leader at the Central Lending Library with a press release and photograph, **APPENDIX C**

8.4 The survey was publicised widely via the website, the local media and across the city at various public buildings and centres. In addition to this, library staff conducted face to face interviews with the public both inside and outside the library.

8.5 The key findings of the User / Non-User Survey 2007 are listed below:

- The majority of users (92%) found libraries very easy or easy to get to.
- 69% of users said that the exteriors of libraries were very good or good. Fewer non-users (56%) agreed but there was broad agreement on which libraries were favoured, e.g. Braunstone scored very highly with both groups, while Southfields was given a low score.
- 83% of users thought that the interior of their library was very good or good.
- 97% of users thought library staff very helpful or helpful.
- The three most important improvements suggested by users were:
  - (i) Increased / better stock (73%)
  - (ii) More computers (63%)
  - (iii) Better seating / equipment (60%)
- Non-users suggested:
  - (i) Increased / better stock (55%)
  - (ii) More comfortable and relaxing (54%)
  - (iii) Better seating and equipment (53%)
 Additional facilities suggested by non-users were access to refreshments, better parking and public toilets.
- The main reasons given by non-users for not using libraries were generic:
  - (i) Too busy (48%)
  - (ii) Doesn't fit my lifestyle (36%)
  - (iii) Prefer to buy books / CDs / DVDs (35%)

Most key findings are supported by a previous non-user survey in 2004 and user survey in 2006.

## **9. Budget, staffing and financial issues**

A number of issues arose during the review relating to budget, staffing and financial matters and the following observations were made:

- a) We were impressed with the commitment and dedication of library staff especially those that task group members spoke to as part of this review – particularly in sharing their experience of working in libraries and expressing how they would like to see the library service improve in the future.
- b) The visit to St. Barnabas library highlighted that there was a need for extra staffing during the peak period of the day when children flocked in after school.
- c) We recognised that staff in the library service were not lacking in ideas, but in the resources and capacity to investigate these. Many staff had suggestions relating to income generation, sponsorship and fundraising in order to improve and increase library services.

## **10. Conclusion**

- 10.1. We need to give serious consideration to the state of our library buildings, e.g. entrance, lighting, parking, space and environment. Some in Leicester are in a poor state, either inside, outside or both and some are in desperate need of redecoration, refurbishment and repair.
- 10.2. The look of a library makes a huge difference. We need libraries to be clean, inviting and modern if we want to attract new people. Many people still perceive libraries as old, dusty places where you cannot talk or make a noise. We need to change the perception of how people see libraries.
- 10.3. Overall, the general image of the libraries in Leicester is good and the range of activities and events held within libraries has increased. We need to build on this and ensure that libraries are accessible, vibrant and interesting places where people want to spend their time.

## **11. Lessons learned for future reviews**

- 11.1 This is the first topic that has been investigated and completed by the Culture & Leisure task group since the introduction of the new scrutiny system. The task group concluded their work by reflecting on the way in which this Scrutiny review was undertaken.
- 11.2 The library visits helped to raise the profile of members in a community setting, in particular, giving staff and users the opportunity to engage with

members. This review has also led to members of the task group becoming more involved in local community activities and charity events.

- 11.3 The hands-on approach adopted in this review allowed members to experience the library service first hand, e.g. visiting libraries, engaging with staff and users and filling in questionnaires on their findings. Members agreed that this resulted in a positive experience and demonstrates that this formula is a model of best practice for future task groups.

**12. Financial Implications**

The report recommends that consideration be given to increasing investment into the library service provision.

**13. Legal Implications**

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

**14. CONTACT**

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