

Report of the Meeting

Rapid Scrutiny Exercise – Library Service Review

Tuesday 18th January, 2011

Attendees

Cllr Jeff Osborn (lead member)
Cllr Richard Britton
Cllr Peter Colmer
Cllr Tony Trotman
Cllr Jon Hubbard
Ceri Williams (Scrutiny Officer)
Craig Sinclair (Scrutiny Support Officer)
Cllr David Jenkins (observer)

Cllr John Thomson – Cabinet Member with responsibility for Libraries
Niki Lewis – Service Director with responsibility for Libraries
Joan Davis – Head of Library Services
John Salen – Project Manager

Purpose and Background

1. The Organisation & Resources Committee at its September 2010 meeting resolved to conduct a Rapid Scrutiny Exercise of the Library Services Review. Reflecting the executive timetable, this meeting was scheduled to allow for scrutiny input, pre-Cabinet decision (January 25th 2011).
2. The Committee is asked to endorse the attached findings/recommendations.

Issues to emerge

Consultation

3. The level of consultation, which included work with focus groups and all Area Boards, was recognised. However, disappointment was voiced that scrutiny was not engaged earlier, which reduced the 'value' which could have been added. Members reflecting on their own Area Board experiences argued that it was not made clear to the public that they were helping to shape a new Library Service based on a significantly reduced budget.
4. Confirmation that following the Cabinet decision further consultation would take place with communities was welcomed and it was felt important that scrutiny, Area Boards, respective Parish/Town Councils

and GROW were all involved in this process. However, as the savings were based on the new model being implemented by September, concern was raised in relation to the amount of time community groups would have following consultation to prepare and plan to run their respective 'level 2 library'.

Volunteers

5. The new model would be based upon those libraries 'community run' and those 'community assisted'. Larger libraries would therefore be able to extend their opening hours, outside the core, by utilising volunteers. The service already extensively used volunteers and Wiltshire's Museums were given as a positive example of where this had proved successful.
6. The members highlighted the risk of attempting to attract enough suitable volunteers in such a short amount of time, and explored whether GROW could identify suitable numbers. It was felt that library work was technically challenging and required people with appropriate skills to run facilities. Reassurance was given that the volunteers would be fully trained and would be given professional support.
7. Members welcomed the commitment to attract young volunteers to work in the service, recognising that the quality of volunteer would heavily influence the success of the service.
8. The 'go-live' date of September 2011 for the new service model was also viewed as ambitious, when considering that public consultation would take place following the Cabinet decision. Members argued that there should be flexibility for communities who would like to run their 'level 2' library but could not meet this deadline. Clear communication of the notice period for closure of libraries, where communities chose to not run their library, was also viewed as important.

Savings

9. The members felt that the report could be clearer in outlining the timescale of savings and where they would be realised.
10. The authority felt it important to retain the mobile library service and had not looked to reduce this area, unlike some neighbouring authorities.
11. Opportunities for generating income were being explored, with the use of electronic books used to illustrate this work. It was emphasised that the libraries had to find a balance as they did not want to go into direct competition with local commercial retailers, for example by selling confectionary.

12. The book fund budget for 2011/12 would be impacted by the Comprehensive Spending Budget Review, but it was hoped through efficient procurement and new ideas such as inviting the public to donate books would mean that the library stock quality would be retained.

Staff

13. Members argued that the report did not clarify the number of staff affected by the management de-layering and the proposals for the new model, and it would have been helpful to have a new structure chart included. In response members noted that the management review was still ongoing across the organisation and was a sensitive area for staff.
14. Currently staff worked different hours across the county. The review aimed to standardise core opening times across Wiltshire.
15. Members were concerned about working relationships and employment law issues, especially in libraries which were community assisted, where professionals and volunteers worked together. Again the Museum Service was used to illustrate how this had worked successfully and appropriate training and support would also be provided.
16. The new RFID self service units would enable a new way of service delivery within the branches. They would also offer a facility to allow the public to access other council services by making payments such as car parking charges. Community run libraries initially would not offer the chip and pin service but this could easily be accommodated at a cost of approximately £1000 per branch.

Conclusion

17. On receiving the evidence the group was supportive of the principles underpinning the vision for the library service; to include support for the investment bid in RFID service units. However, it was felt that earlier engagement with scrutiny would have allowed for more extensive 'non-executive' member input. Concern was also raised about the time available for communities to take over 'level 2' libraries and the propensity of the Wiltshire public to volunteer, in appropriate numbers, and with the right skills.

Recommendations

18. The Committee is asked to endorse the following recommendations, which will then be referred to Cabinet on Jan 25th:

- a) That the following additions are added to the Cabinet Report to clarify the identified 'savings':
 - i) full details of where savings will be achieved, and
 - ii) a timeline listing when savings need to be realised;
- b) That Cabinet agrees that communities who have expressed an interest in running their "level 2 library" and are working towards that end are not prevented from doing so, and are treated flexibly, if unable to meet the September 2011 timescale, which the members felt to be ambitious;
- c) In respect of the communications/consultation plan to emerge following Cabinet approval, that:
 - iii) Overview & Scrutiny is invited to review this document before it is actioned, and
 - iv) the plan includes consultation with Area Boards, Town/Parish Councils and GROW and clearly demonstrates how the authority will ensure recruitment of sufficient and suitable volunteer numbers;

Report Author

Ceri Williams – Scrutiny Team