

AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel was held on 9 December 2008.

PRESENT: Councillor Brunton (Chair), Councillors Carter (as substitute for Councillor McIntyre), Cole (as substitute for Councillor J A Walker), Dunne, Elder, C Hobson, McPartland (as substitute for Councillor Majid) and Williams.

OFFICERS: J Bennington, J Brittain, P Clark, T White and E Williamson.

**** APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillors McIntyre, Majid and J A Walker.

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made at this point of the meeting.

****MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel held on 22 October 2008 were taken as read and approved as a correct record.

MIDDLESBROUGH LIBRARIES – INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction a report of the Scrutiny Support Officer was submitted which confirmed that the Overview and Scrutiny Board at its meeting held on 18 November 2008 had agreed that the Panel should undertake a scrutiny examination in relation to the public library service which was currently the subject of an efficiency review.

NOTED

LIBRARY SERVICE REVIEW

The Director of Regeneration presented a report, which provided an overview of the public library service currently delivered in Middlesbrough.

The Panel was advised that in comparison with other library services and the measurement against the Government's library value for money standards, both indicated that Middlesbrough's library service was very expensive. As a result it had been identified as an appropriate subject for an efficiency review.

Government standards for value for money in the library service were measured by cost per visit. Middlesbrough had one of the most expensive library services in the UK at £4.26 in comparison with £2.53 (upper quartile) and £3.46 (bottom quartile).

Comparable costs for neighbouring authorities were reported as follows: -

Redcar and Cleveland	£2.74
Stockton	£3.05
Hartlepool	£3.23.

The Library Service was provided through the Central Library, twelve branch libraries, one village centre and a mobile library the locations of which were shown on the plans and a summary of costs given in Appendix 1 of the report submitted. A range of services was provided in support of Council objectives supporting literacy, and life skills as well as social space for local communities. The mobile library visited outlying districts of Stainton and Nunthorpe and housebound service thus contributing to the LAA target in respect of supporting independent living.

The main features of the current service were reported as follows: -

- a) the Public Library Service Standard (PLSS) target for aggregated opening hours per 1,000 population was 128 hours in comparison with the aggregated total in Middlesbrough of 159 hours;
- b) 23 of the 63 hours per week of access to a branch or mobile library were outside normal office hours;
- c) many services were accessible twenty four hours by means of the website covering such items as renewals, reservations, subscription databases, e-databases such as Britannica and other major reference works;
- d) all residents were within two miles of a static public library with 98% within one mile in comparison with the PLSS national target of 88%;
- e) although Middlesbrough had above average provision of static service points it was pointed out that this was not reflected by the use of such services;
- f) the library service was delivered through 62.4 FTE staff with staffing levels being allocated on the basis of need in terms of use and health and safety;
- g) a casual pool, equivalent to 2 FTE was also required to ensure that libraries remained open during holiday periods and to cover for sickness;
- h) a mobile library was provided which delivered services to sheltered accommodation, care homes and some outlying estates with a high elderly population and a housebound service to those unable to physically access a static library;
- i) the mobile and housebound service contributed to the new National Indicator NI 42 relating to the number of vulnerable people who were supported to maintain independent living;
- j) in addition to frontline staff a team of 12 librarians operated across the service based in branch libraries whose role was to increase use of libraries through promoting books, reading and learning, encouraging use and thus supporting the objectives of improving literacy and other skills for life;
- k) in addition a selected number of e-databases were available remotely to library members at home, office or schools and others such as Ancestry.com were only available by means of the library network thus encouraging new users into the libraries;
- l) information was provided of the current age profile of users.

The report outlined the current situation in terms of performance in relation to National Indicators, CPA assessment and the Public Library Service Standards. Although Middlesbrough would not be reporting on measure N19 regarding the use of libraries in the LAA 2008/2011 it was confirmed that the situation would be monitored locally.

It was noted that in 2007-2008 the service had performed well against the PLSS achieving 8 out of 10 standards but less well against CPA overall. The statistical information provided showed that in terms of the PLSS target relating to the number of library visits per 1,000 population Middlesbrough had a figure of 4714 in comparison with the national figure of 6300.

The report identified the 2008/2009 Library Service budget in three broad areas as follows: -

	£000	Percentage
Staffing	1,654	72.6%
Purchase Fund	419	18.4%
Other operational costs	4	9%
Total expenditure	2,277	100%
Income	(103)	4.5%

It was reported that there was minimal flexibility for finding efficiency savings in the operational costs area of the budget. The partnership contract meant that the majority of the building costs were no longer within the service budget and therefore not available as potential savings. It was also pointed out that there were limited opportunities to increase income without restricting the service to those who could afford it. The Panel was advised that savings would have to be found almost entirely from either the staffing or purchase fund budgets.

A breakdown was given of the purchase fund of £419,000. It was confirmed that although the CD market was reducing it was noted that the whole media market constituted a good proportion of libraries' income (£19k last year plus £1,300 in media fines). The issues in 2007/2008 for all media were reported as 52,977, which represented 8% of the annual issues.

In terms of overall resources there had been large-scale investment of over £2million from the capital programme over the past six years for both the fabric of the buildings and the bookstock following a Best Value Review. The last two years had also seen additional one-off funding to enable an improved programme of events to be offered. In 2006/2007 £10,000 had been allocated from the Regeneration Initiatives Fund and in 2007/2008, £20,000 had been allocated from the performance reward funding. Such investment had resulted in a 7.9% increase in active members (27,016) and an increase of 3.2% in issue figures against the national trend of decline (645,449 issues) but not an increase in visits.

Although a direct link between additional events and an increase in visitor numbers was difficult to quantify it was considered that providing a wider range of outreach activities and events had made an impact. Members were advised that it was possible to build funding into the base budget then the programme of events could be maintained which would hopefully lead to a further increase in library use.

Reference was made to a mapping exercise which had been conducted regarding library membership. It was pointed out that anecdotal evidence suggested that for most libraries whilst adult users may use more than one library, those under 16 years tended to use only their local library.

It was also pointed out that other agencies and Council departments used many of the Town's libraries for activities such as Sure Start, Neighbourhood Management, Job Clubs, Business Link, CAB, Credit Union, Councillors' ward surgeries and local history groups.

Members referred to excellent work carried out by library staff and although commenting on the current situation of a number of individual branch libraries it was acknowledged that further detailed information was required on the usage and operational arrangements prior to formulating any conclusions.

The subsequent deliberations of the Panel centred on the following areas: -

Efficiency Review:

- it was confirmed that as part of the current efficiency review issues such as broad usage, membership and costs would be examined in order to clarify the position and assist in selecting the areas upon which to focus to identify savings;

Membership - Number of visits - Promotions:

- the Panel was advised that nationally, the use of libraries was declining but that Middlesbrough in a challenging environment was shown to be above the average trend;
- It was acknowledged that whilst a number of activities had increased membership further promotional work was required in order to achieve increases in the number of visits;
- Members suggested, that if available, more detailed information on the age profile for previous years may assist in identifying any trends which would inform the development of any promotional events which could be geared to different age groups;

- an indication was given of the range of recent activities and reading promotions which had previously been organised and a number of speakers invited as part of the National Year of Reading events;
- the possibility of broadening activities and varying the use of library facilities in order to increase the overall attractiveness thus encouraging more visitors was also discussed;
- it was noted however that other than one - off funding for small promotional events there were severe budget constraints to significantly expand such an area of activity;

Comparable Performance Information with Neighbouring Authorities:

- although it was pointed out that further information could be provided it was noted at this stage that Middlesbrough in comparison with other Tees Valley authorities had a much more generous branch network provision per head of population and thus more staffing;
- it was also pointed out that whilst there may be variations in the overall provision and opening hours the determinant factor of unit cost was predominantly related to the number of libraries within each area;
- the current provision of libraries across the Tees Valley reflected the decisions taken by previous local authorities and in terms of Middlesbrough had been in acknowledgement of the high level of social deprivation in the area;

Staffing:

- in commenting on the higher staffing costs in relation to a number of branch libraries such as Acklam, Berwick Hills and Hemlington an indication was given of a number of factors which impacted on such a level such as the amount of issues; some were group headquarters; and as in the case of Berwick Hills the base for many outreach activities;
- in response to a query as to the feasibility of outreach workers being located in one base the Panel was advised of the limitations of appropriate space for example in the Central Library and that from an efficiency perspective such workers were better placed nearer to the patch they were working in;
- a suggestion was made to examine the possibility of extending the current Saturday opening hours although reference was made to the likely increased costs involved;
- it was also noted that front line staff were already on a rota and worked every other Saturday morning;

Alternative Locations:

- Members suggested the possibility of moving library provision into schools within available space which was seen as an opportunity of increasing the numbers using such a facility given the number of visitors such as parents and/or carers collecting children to and from school;
- it was pointed out that where library provision was located in schools such as Abingdon it did not necessarily increase the number of issues and indications were that in some cases people were deterred from using such locations;
- although possible access difficulties given school terms were recognised Members considered that there maybe more scope in examining the use of secondary schools rather than primary schools;
- an indication was given of the range of facilities available and the high use of IT equipment and shared use of electronic game devices especially in relation to outreach work was noted;

- extending the use of Community Centres and District Centre facilities was also suggested for possible examination as an alternative venue for library facilities;
- where appropriate, extended use of the mobile library service was suggested especially with regard to static library facilities with low usage although the Panel was mindful of increasing fuel costs and limitations of such a service ;

Outreach Work:

- given the positive impact of outreach work Members asked if there was scope to increase such activities;
- although there were resource limitations both in terms of funding and staffing it was pointed out that there might be scope to shift certain library provision to accommodate such activities;

Use of libraries by other Council departments and other organisations:

- in terms of receiving any income from other organisations using library facilities it was noted that a nominal fee was charged for certain groups but that in the majority of cases charging a rent would only add to the financial burden of the majority of groups the activities of which supplemented the use of library facilities as social and/or community purpose and in the case of Sure Start encouraged reading as part of their work;
- reference was made to an earlier Best Value Performance review undertaken in 2001 when it had been suggested that libraries be utilised as a One Stop facility although it was pointed out that although operational costs maybe reduced in some respects there were likely to be additional costs in capital costs and delivering a service from a patchwork of individual service points.

It was acknowledged that the difficult challenge facing the current efficiency review was to identify ways of reducing the unit cost but at the same time not impacting on the usage of library facilities.

In conclusion Members identified the following main areas upon which to focus as part of the scrutiny review: -

- i) measures to increase income;
- ii) ways of increasing the number of visits;
- iii) efficiency savings;
- iv) alternative provision;
- v) identifying trends.

AGREED as follows: -

1. That the Officers be thanked for the information provided which would be incorporated into the overall scrutiny review.
2. That as part of the scrutiny investigation the Panel undertakes the following:-
 - a) visit a number of libraries;
 - b) invites the Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development to attend a meeting of the Panel;
3. That further information be provided in relation to the following aspects:-

- a) costs and operational arrangements of mobile library service;
- b) extent to which schools with library facilities were used;
- c) comparative information with neighbouring local authorities.