

**AD HOC SCRUTINY PANEL**

A meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel was held on 8 January 2009.

**PRESENT:** Councillor Brunton (Chair), Councillors Dunne, Elder, McIntyre, Majid, J A Walker and Williams.

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

**\*\* PRESENT BY INVITATION:** Councillor Budd (Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development).

**\*\* AN APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE** was submitted on behalf of Councillor C Hobson.

**\*\* 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 9 December 2008 were submitted.

A Member raised the question of redundancies and in response the Director of Regeneration reaffirmed that he was not in a position to speculate in this regard and that further information on staffing costs had been included in the report to be discussed later in the meeting.

**AGREED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel held on 9 December 2008 be approved.

**TERMS OF REFERENCE**

With the approval of the Chair the Scrutiny Officer submitted the suggested aims and terms of reference of the current scrutiny investigation of the library provision in Middlesbrough in order for the Panel to contribute recommendations towards the Council's current efficiency review.

The suggested terms of reference were reported as follows: -

- a) To consider ways to increase levels of income within the service.
- b) To examine what methods are being used to increase visitor numbers and consider what more could be done.
- c) To consider where efficiency savings could be made and the likely impact of those savings.
- d) To consider current library provision, proposed provision and alternative methods of providing the service more efficiently.

The report also outlined the proposed methodology of the scrutiny investigation.

**AGREED** that the terms of reference and methodology of the scrutiny investigation as outlined be approved.

**SITE VISITS – RAINBOW CENTRE – WHINNEY BANKS - ABINGDON**

With the approval of the Chair the notes of site visits which had been undertaken by the Panel on 7 January 2009 were circulated at the meeting.

As agreed by the Panel at its meeting held on 9 December 2008 arrangements had been made to visit a number of libraries in different locations and settings.

The key features of each library at the Rainbow Centre Library, Whinney Banks Library and Abingdon Library and general comments and/or information arising during the site visits were outlined.

**AGREED** as follows: -

1. That the information provided be noted.
2. That Jen Brittain and respective library staff be thanked for their assistance and information provided during the site visits.

## **LIBRARY SERVICE REVIEW INFORMATION**

Further to the meeting of the Panel held on 9 December 2008 a report of the Director of Regeneration was submitted which provided further information on those aspects identified by Members with regard to the current library service.

Staffing Costs:

Details were provided of staffing costs including overtime payments in respect of 2007/2008 as shown in Appendix 1 of the report submitted.

Reference was made to two types of overtime payments in the library service as follows: -

- a) enhanced payments for working weekend hours, which were paid as an additional half time payment at the member of staff's current grade;
- b) payment for any additional hours that the member of staff agrees to work to cover sickness, annual leave, meetings, training courses and other reasons to ensure the service continuity.

It was noted that amounts varied between branches because some staff worked as relief in branches other than their base, however overtime payments were currently coded to their base branch.

The Panel was advised that as there was currently no indication of redundancies it was not possible to identify costs in this regard,

Current opening hours for each library:

Appendix 2 of the report detailed the published opening hours for each library. It was noted that Abingdon library currently closed at 5pm on Monday and Wednesday evenings due to staff vacancies.

Current cost of purchase fund:

It was confirmed that the bookfund for 2008-2009 was set at £419,000 the projected spend for which was shown in Appendix 3.

Comparisons with neighbouring authorities:

Comparative information in relation to neighbouring Tees Valley authorities was outlined in Appendix 4 of the report as follows: -

Borough	Costs	Number of libraries	Number of mobiles	Visits	Cost/Visit	Population
Middlesbrough	2,846,476	13	1	652,413	£4.36	138,700
Hartlepool	1,838,434	8	1	591,142	£3.11	91,400
Redcar	2,619,250	13	1	954,325	£2.74	139,400
Stockton	2,902,559	11	2	952,330	£3.05	190,200
Darlington	1,337,080	3	1	335,712	£3.98	100,000

#### Mobile and Housebound provision:

The Panel was advised that the mobile library details of which were outlined in Appendix 5 of the report served customers who could not easily get to a branch library and stopped at day care centres and community centres. It was specially adapted and fitted with a lift for wheelchair access. The stock carried on the mobile allowed customers a wide range of stock and an opportunity to select their own books.

The mobile library was also fitted with satellite technology, which allowed Internet access and online access to the library management system.

It was pointed out that the Emergency Planning unit was also looking at procuring funding to equip the mobile library to enable its use as a control centre on site in the event of a major incidence in Middlesbrough.

The housebound service served customers who found it difficult to leave their home because of a disability. The service was delivered via a small courier van and customers were supplied with a small selection of books every three weeks, the choice of which was pre-arranged with library staff. It was confirmed that there were 160 customers currently using such a service.

The costs for the mobile (total £74,525) and housebound services (total £31,364) in relation to 2007/2008 were outlined in the report.

#### Library income:

Appendix 6 of the report listed the main sources of library income in respect of the previous year 2007/2008 and confirmation given that the service continued to investigate ways to generate income.

#### Methods used to increase visitor numbers:

Appendix 7 of the report gave an indication of the range of activities that staff had organised over the past year to encourage visits to libraries in Middlesbrough in terms of adults and children.

The subsequent deliberations of the Panel centred on the following areas.

#### Staffing Costs

In response to references to apparent high staffing costs at particular libraries it was reiterated that such costs varied between branches as some staff worked as relief in other branches but for financial purposes the hours worked were coded to their base branch.

Reference was made to changes over the years in respect of group headquarters. It was confirmed that regardless of usage the determinant factor in terms of creating group headquarters for which there was currently four to cover all areas was the availability of space.

Members were reminded of the previous meeting when information had been provided regarding the direct staff costs in relation to each library. In terms of achieving savings possibly derived from closures of branch libraries it was acknowledged that direct staffing costs needn't necessarily be seen in isolation but in the context of the overall management structure.

### Mobile Library Service

The Panel sought information on the effectiveness of the current mobile library service and if such a service had been reviewed and used for promotional purposes.

Officers explained that so far only small reviews had been undertaken in terms of the numbers of centres and most vulnerable people visited. Whilst the mobile vehicle was branded with a view to being used for promotions and was used frequently at events such as Cleveland Show, Mela, 10K Races, other weekend events and possibly at bingo halls in the future it had only been used as a promotional vehicle in its own right at its launch in the Town Centre. It was considered that there might be scope in the future to extend this area of activity.

Should it prove necessary to close certain branch libraries Members asked the extent to which the mobile library service could assist in this regard. It was explained that given the current timetable for the use of the mobile library there was a limited period of time, which could be utilised, to extend promotional activities to the extent as suggested. The Panel was also asked to bear in mind some of the practical constraints such as the administrative tasks and the loading and changing of stock.

The Panel acknowledged the need to continue to provide a service to the most vulnerable but enquired about the scope of providing an alternative provision and the feasibility of providing additional mobile libraries but mindful of additional costs.

It was confirmed that the possibility of Emergency Planning unit procuring funding to enable the mobile library to be used as a control centre on site in the event of a major incident involved the installation of appropriate technical equipment.

Confirmation was also given that the other vehicle currently available was only appropriate to be used for housebound visits and a courier service.

Members enquired as to the opportunity to review the routes of the mobile library service and try to make more effective use of the vehicle. In response it was confirmed that whilst this could be examined the route had been determined following detailed discussions and agreement between all parties concerned.

The Panel emphasised the importance of maintaining a library service but that in appropriate cases alternative provision as to how the service could be provided should be investigated.

### Rainbow Centre Library

Given the future changes to the Rainbow Centre reference was made to the possibility of expanding and moving the library premises to a different area where there was currently more pedestrian flow nearer to the Tesco supermarket. The Panel was advised that there was currently no rental charge for the space currently used and the existing planning application involved changes to the entrance area adjacent to the library and provision for additional shops.

A suggestion was made for improved signage at the Centre in terms of the library.

It was noted that the library was well used on Sundays with approximately 70 – 100 visitors and that there were only two full time staff the remaining staff working part time.

### Abingdon Library

Since very few adults used the library and given the proximity of the Central Library Members suggested that the possibility of returning the library to the Abingdon School could be examined.

An indication was given of a number of problems associated with library premises located within schools with particular regard to access which could be a deterrent to people using such facilities.

### Whinney Banks Library

Members reiterated their concerns regarding the condition of the library premises within the current Whinney Banks Youth and Community Centre which was to be replaced with a new combined Health and Community Centre to be built nearby as part of the overall redevelopment proposals in the area.

Although a reference was made to other libraries at Acklam and Newport in the vicinity other Members referred to the likelihood of such libraries not being used by Acklam Green residents especially with regard to the vulnerable members of the community requiring appropriate facilities.

### Internet /Computer Access

It was suggested that the possibility of increasing the yearly computer/Internet access charge from £1.00 be examined but so as not to impact on what was considered to be a well used service. It was noted that the charge had been introduced in the current financial year and had not significantly affected the numbers using the service.

The possibility of linking to the Leisure Link Card system was also suggested.

### Finance

It was reiterated that the current partnership contract with Mouchel meant that the majority of the building costs were not within the service budget and therefore not available as potential savings.

In response to suggestions for utilising various budgets it was acknowledged that the question of virement of budgets was a political matter and the focus of the scrutiny investigation was on the current efficiency review of the library service.

### Generating Income

Whilst Members acknowledged the efforts and innovative ways, which had been pursued in an endeavour to generate additional income and to promote and increase interest and membership it was suggested that the marketing skills within the Council could be further utilised in this regard.

Reference was made to the current methods of advertising book sales, which included the Council's website, use of local lists and professional contacts. Members supported such a venture and encouraged other ways of advertising such sales thus reducing disposal costs.

Given that the bulk of the budget related to staffing costs, purchasing fund and certain operational requirements little remained to significantly increase current efforts to generate additional income without increasing charges which may impact on usage especially bearing in mind the socio-economic factors of the area.

An indication was given of the current efficiency of the procurement arrangements in respect of the book fund, which was carried out in accordance with the North Eastern Purchasing Organisation procedures and requirements. The CIPFA requirements related to the need to ensure stock turnover. Although there may be scope to reduce the book fund careful judgement had to be taken so as not to impact significantly on current and potential users of the service.

The Panel was advised that in overall terms and given the promotional efforts the rate of decline in library services in Middlesbrough was very small in recent years and smaller than the national average.

### Young People

Specific reference was made to the current activities pursued to encourage young people to raise interest and use library facilities such as the following and others outlined in the report submitted: -

- Authors invited to schools;
- School class visits to libraries;
- Bookstart campaign in partnership with Middlesbrough Primary Care Trust of gifting books to children.

Given current trends it was considered essential that efforts should continue to ensure that visits to library facilities remained a positive experience.

It was recognised that many of the projects such as the Primary Link Project which aimed to increase children's access to library services relied on the co-operation of individual schools. As in the case of Middlesbrough only one school had initially supported the scheme.

#### Comparisons with Neighbouring Authorities

Clarification was sought regarding the information provided in relation to Redcar & Cleveland Authority in comparison with Middlesbrough with a similar population but shown to have significantly higher number of visits in respect of 2007/2008. It was explained that this was likely to be a one-off situation whilst libraries in that area had been used as a contact point to renew bus passes.

#### Media Hire

It was recognised that although the media market constituted a significant proportion of the libraries' income it was a changing and competitive market.

**AGREED** that the Officers be thanked for the information provided which would be incorporated into the overall scrutiny review.