

UNISON Report to the Scrutiny Board 17th July 2012

Community Hubs Proposals – an initial response

Libraries in the wrong places with uncertain services

General observations about the proposals as a whole

- **Purely a Savings measure:** The only purpose for the Community Hubs programme is to save money within the Leisure and Communities portfolio. However, the amount libraries have to save seems disproportionate to the other services involved.
- **Technology and other claims:** The claims about improved access, social inclusion, better stock and new partners are attempts to justify what is essentially a savings exercise. The claims appear misleading and disrespectful in terms of disguising what the library service already achieves, and use dubious statistics to support doubtful gains.
In 4.9.4 it is claimed that the use of digital media will create a city wide information hub. The library service has already been providing access to online dictionaries and encyclopedias for five years so we would argue that such a hub already exists. Only the new self-issue technology is new and as we shall show below has proved to be unpopular at the Tettenhall pilot. Indeed the majority of the technology mentioned in the report is already in operation and plays no part in the creation of this hub network. In 4.9.5 mention is made of stock movements, we already use advanced stock management tools to move stock around. The savings highlighted in 11.2 include a reduction of £225,000 from the stock and subscriptions budget. To do this would in fact jeopardise the very electronic resources mentioned in the report, never mind their introduction.
- **Location:** Which specific libraries are in the wrong place? We would argue that most libraries are generally in a suitable location already, and that the public have shown that they are willing to make specific journeys to use our service. Some of the proposed hubs seem to be in much worse locations and could make the service far less visible – Whitmore Reans in Dunstall Hill Community Centre for example.
- **Hub Successes?:** It is claimed that the hub concept has proved successful in other parts of the UK, but where? How much investment was required in order to bring about these successes? Our model hubs are Wednesfield and Blakenhall but these are both contained in new-build developments that required significant investment, and it is arguable how well they have worked. We believe that the models suggested for Wolverhampton would compare very poorly with examples of co-located services in other Black Country authorities such as the libraries at Brownhills and Oldbury.
- **Been there, done it, failed miserably:** We had service points before that fit the hub brief – Scotlands & Underhill, Daisy Bank, Mary Pointon Libraries and yet these were closed due to poor usage. Could our new hubs go the same way? How will any future hubs avoid the mistakes of the past? Bradmore Library in Bantock House was deemed unsuitable and closed three years ago, so wouldn't having a library in Bradmore Community Centre (sacrificing the successful Finchfield branch in the process) be a backward step recreating what has already failed?

- **Costs of creating hubs:** There will be costs involved in creating hubs – e.g. refurbishment of buildings etc. Could this money be better spent upgrading existing library sites to a better standard? Have the relevant costs been properly identified and how would they impact on the potential savings to be achieved?
- **How are we proposing to achieve rest of savings:** If rationalising of buildings only saves Libraries £150k this still leaves a large shortfall. The £600k reduction in the staffing budget must mean loss of staff, either by voluntary or compulsory redundancies.
- **Public Consultation Concerns:** The whole consultation process seems very flimsy. The idea that a 12 week period beginning in July could properly begin to be analysed in August seems ludicrous. Is there enough time from when the consultation ends in September to draw up a robust report ready for Cabinet in October, or will it be a rushed report based on decisions that had already been made anyway? We fear that conclusions have already been drawn and that the consultation is just a box-ticking exercise.
What kind of analysis will be involved and who is doing it? Do the people conducting the consultation understand the issues at stake – are they users of the facilities involved? Finally, there is simply not enough detail about the proposed hubs and their implications, meaning that the public are being denied the chance to make an informed decision. The report has been created using broad brushstrokes to make the hubs model seem plausible whilst hiding the true implications of what could happen to the services involved.
- **Expansion of service availability:** There is very little evidence that people want to use the library beyond the current 7pm. The Blakenhall pilot clearly shows that the vast majority of users want to come in when there is a member of staff on duty. Our customers value the service and advice that we provide to them far more than is tangible in simple statistics. The impersonal nature of self issue machines should not be lost in this matter. Library staff offer a first line community service which no machine can ever replace.
- **Staff Consultation Concerns:** Staff were presented with an initial summary of hub proposals on the 21st June but now require a further chance to offer full feed back and opinions. Whilst drop in sessions would be held at some libraries these are geared towards the public so we feel that a separate programme of staff consultation is required for each service point.
- **Staff Implications:** we are concerned about how the hubs will be staffed, both in terms of numbers (to operate buildings safely) and skills (risk of de-professionalising the service). Staff would potentially be taking on new roles and responsibilities effectively meaning that our jobs would radically change in nature – Hub Assistant, Hub Manager etc. Another fear is that hubs may at some point be transferred into community ownership, replacing paid skilled staff with volunteers.
- **No future proofing or career structure:** we feel that the hub concept puts the future of libraries very much at risk, robbing dedicated staff of job security and career progression whilst leaving whatever is left of the service open to further future reductions.

Observations on Individual Hub Proposals

- **Ashmore Park:** the public have already expressed their anger at the idea of moving the library into the youth centre. To now present them with the same option suggests that their concerns have been completely ignored. The Youth centre buildings are poorly positioned in terms of distance from adequate parking and it would seem that there would be a conflict of interest between library and youth service usage.
- **Bilston:** there is a complete lack of detail other than a basic aspiration to group services together somewhere. To provide a new-build Community service hub would cost millions, where would the money come from if not from the £3million highlighted in the report? We believe that the library should be the focal point of any new hub development rather than being sidelined to accommodate other partners.
- **Blakenhall:** what does “continue to develop new library” actually mean? What lessons have been learnt from the pilot that can be utilised elsewhere? Concerns that the Blakenhall model if widely adopted would mean a limited library staff presence and place a huge burden on individual staff members to keep a place afloat.
- **Collingwood:** losing a staffed service point to replace it with a vague self-service facility at an unknown location. This would leave a very poor level of service provision for a large area of north Wolverhampton including Bushbury and Fordhouses.
- **East Park:** The proposed move to Eastfield Community Centre would rob the East Park estate of their only community building. The local school have said that class visits would cease because it would be too far for the children to walk, and many of the elderly borrowers would be unable to make the transition for fear of crossing the busy main road. The library has only recently been rebuilt and yet would be sacrificed in favour of poor quality accommodation in the community centre.
East Park library currently holds 12000 books and having had £320,000 spent on its extension just 7 years ago it would make no sense to close the building now. The partitioned extension is also used for numerous community activities and thus such a valuable community space would be lost under these proposals.
- **Finchfield:** the proposed relocation at Bradmore is a considerable distance away from Finchfield’s primary catchment area. The previous library presence in Bradmore was deemed a failure and closed down despite being part of a wider service at Bantock House. The Bradmore Community Centre also lacks any adequate buildings in which a library could be housed. Two of the three main buildings on the site are little more than sheds and are in need of total replacement, so how can a move here be viewed as an enhancement?
Finchfield Library is a well used community resource, having over 20000 items of stock that Bradmore Community Centre simply cannot accommodate. It would make far more sense to maintain the current service in its entirety and perhaps build additional space to include extra services, although the core of the site must remain a library. There is clear support for the library in its current location and to move it elsewhere would jeopardise the future of library services in the area.
- **Long Knowle:** although the site would be retained, it is unclear exactly how the reconfigured building would operate. The library could potentially be made much smaller in order to accommodate other things, and the effect on staffing levels/responsibilities is not specified.

- **Low Hill:** potentially moving the library service out of an iconic building seems misguided – what would the building be used for if not as a library? The current community centre is outdated and much less inviting than the existing library, plus does it have the space to accommodate the existing level of branch provision?
- **Pendeford:** although the site would be retained, it is unclear exactly how the reconfigured building would operate. The library could potentially be made much smaller in order to accommodate other things, and the effect on staffing levels/responsibilities is not specified.
- **Penn:** stands to be merged with Warstones at an as yet unspecified location – this effectively would mean the loss of a staffed service point, so what would be the direct implication in terms of jobs? The prospect of a Penn/Penn Fields Community Hub seems vague, possibly utilising the vacated Penn Fields Special School.
- **Spring Vale:** moving to the former Parkfields School seems to be sacrificing the current library building to safeguard the ongoing community use of the school complex. How would the merger with ELS work, both in terms of staffing levels and responsibilities?
- **Tettenhall:** seems to be unchanged by the proposals but there may still be potential significant changes to staffing and the building layout. Staff concerns about the introduction and uptake of RFID self-service here appear to have been glossed over. The cost of leasing the building could remain an ongoing cause for concern, and the idea that Tettenhall would function as a standalone library rather than a hub could potentially make it isolated from the rest of the service.
- **Warstones:** stands to be merged with Penn at an as yet unspecified location – this effectively would mean the loss of a staffed service point, so what would be the direct implication in terms of jobs? It remains to be seen what shape the library would take as part of the larger Community Service hub – would it be at the forefront or be sidelined by other more prominent services?
- **Wednesfield:** although the site would be retained, it is unclear exactly how the reconfigured building would operate and the effect on staffing levels/responsibilities is not specified.
- **Whitmore Reans:** the proposal to move the library from a highly visible location next to the Avion Centre to a backwater building hidden in a housing estate seems completely contrary to the idea of offering improved access to services. If Whitmore Reans is identified as an ‘area of need’ then how is removing a community building helping to improve the area? Whitmore Reans holds 11500 books and has high public computer usage. It already is a focal point of the community that surrounds it and it would be a serious mistake to undo that link. The proposed new site at Dunstall Hill community centre would appear to have extremely limited scope for housing a library of the size required for the area, indeed the move would take it away from its current client base, and there is no guarantee of generating a new one.
- **Education Library Service:** There are concerns about how the merger with Spring Vale Library would work, both in terms of staffing and stock availability, possibility amounting to another closure by stealth. As the service is part-financed by schools, any dilution of service could result in a loss of revenue which would risk the very viability of the facility.

- **Heath Town Service Hub and Lower Bradley:** Self-service only libraries are planned for these developments, suggesting that the library presence in each would be nothing more than a deposit collection. It is therefore misleading to claim that the proposals as a whole will retain the status quo of 15 libraries in the City when that total includes these unmanned points whilst removing staffed service at Collingwood and Penn. Under CIPFA monitoring procedures, an unmanned library cannot be reported on, thus reducing the number of true libraries in the city to 13.

Further Statistical Context

There is clearly a lack of context given to the statistics quoted in relation to the pilots that have been undertaken. It is only fair to say that the 3 month old Blakenhall pilot has not been running long enough to draw any meaningful statistics from the data, so what has been quoted must be quantified.

So to place some context onto the Blakenhall figures we must assess just how many items have been issued and relate that to the rest of our service. During April and May Blakenhall issued around 1800 items, which in itself is a commendable effort, and much praise should be given to our colleague for achieving those results. However closer analysis of the data indicates some strange issue spikes in May which may indicate that someone may have been playing with the self issue equipment as opposed to genuinely issuing items for themselves. It is evident that whilst Blakenhall is a welcome addition to the library family it would be disastrous to see it as the future template for branch libraries in our city. It holds just 3500 books (compared to a branch average of nearly 15000) whilst many of our service points have more than 3000 items on loan at anyone point. It has very low issues per hour, even when manned, in fact over five times less than the branch average for April and May 2012.

Without context the quotation of over 3500 transactions for the self service pod at Tettenhall is also meaningless and misleading. It seems that the figures related to March through to May, but that is not entirely clear. To begin with the quoted figures are transactions, hence detailing issues and discharges combined rather than just issues alone. Tettenhall for April and May had total issues in excess of 19000 items, whilst 13600 items were returned in the same period, thus resulting in 32600 transactions of which the self-issue accounted for barely 10%.

From this it is clear that the pod is not the item of choice for the users of the library – indeed staff have commented that many borrowers, especially the elderly, have shunned the new machine in favour of maintaining face to face contact. Self-serve technology is a welcome addition to the service, provided that it is used to offer borrowers additional choices at particularly busy periods thus supporting rather than replacing staff. At all times staff should be retained to deliver the customer-focused friendly service that makes our libraries such a vital part of their communities.

Conclusion

It is only possible to view this proposal as a cost cutting exercise, it is extremely misleading to attempt to suggest that what is proposed is an enhancement of the library service of Wolverhampton. In places the proposal is disrespectful to the service that is already supplied. Well located and used services will be moved to locations that are far away from their established client base, effectively increasing the social exclusion of those users. In some cases there is not even a specified location for the library to go to. The report makes no reference to the level of service that each library will provide, indeed the council website merely states that a community hub **could** have a library in it. There is mention of an information point for each hub, libraries have for decades performed this very function so it seems somewhat strange that a distinction should be made. It is claimed that the proposal will provide the city with the same number of libraries that we have now, but a library service is not necessarily a library. Under the reporting rules for CIPFA a library must be a manned site, at least two of the proposed sites are going to be self service only so do not count as libraries.

The plan has only a limited vision of what hubs could be and certainly the majority will be little more than community centres with a library facility shoehorned inside. Indeed, the whole proposals seem to be a cynical attempt to rationalise the building stock and staffing levels specifically within the Leisure & Communities portfolio. There appears to have been little if any serious engagement made with wider council departments to assess what other services could also be incorporated, such as housing and benefits desks, neighbourhood warden space or children's centres. We would contend that the authors of the report, in claiming to offer a visionary look at the future, have failed to look beyond their own back garden. There simply is not enough information given to the reader of this report to enable them to make an informed decision during the consultation process. Based on the information within the consultation document the public are effectively being asked to choose what size box they would like and we will fill it for you later. The larger hubs are particularly troublesome suggestions as their exact purpose, size and even location is not clear from the report.

The claims that the hubs will bring new services to the community are at best questionable and at times just false. The self issuing technology will be most welcome by colleagues as an additional tool, but it is equally clear that the human face of libraries is the one that the public want. We are not going to be providing new electronic media as a result of this proposal, there is already 24 hour access to a range of electronic resources whilst e-books are provided via a Black Country wide consortium of libraries and are accessible through the library catalogue. Thus it is disingenuous to say, as it does in 4.5 of the report, that it is a key feature of the new hubs.

To finish I would say that far from providing a service that is fit for purpose for the future, these proposals take the library - once called the street corner university - and puts it into the garden shed.