Appendix 4c

Southend Borough Council
Cultural Advisory Working Party
Library Service Review

Focus Group Feedback Report

Introduction
This report provides feedback from four focus groups and a small discussion group, which were held on 7th and 8th January 2013. Focus groups were held with existing library staff (2 groups involving 34 people in total), members of the Library Service management team (1 group - ) and current volunteers (1 group involving 9 people). Four councillors attended the discussion group.

A number of themes have been identified from the discussions and these are outlined in the main body of this report.

Methodology
Each of the focus groups followed the same interactive format and undertook the same discussions. They focussed on the following questions, which were influenced by the questionnaire circulated by the Cultural Advisory Working Party:

a. What are the strengths of current library services?
b. What are the current issues/challenges that need to be addressed?
c. What might future services look like?
e. Comments - what else needs to be fed into the review?

The discussions were undertaken in a large group, in small groups or in pairs. They were recorded on flip chart and audio.

The discussion with the councillors also addressed the above questions, but in response to the smaller numbers was less structured and notes were recorded by the facilitator.

All those who attended the focus groups fully participated in the discussions and welcomed the opportunity to do so. They clearly shared a strong commitment to and interest in the library service in Southend and to ensuring that it was fit for purpose both now and in the future.

Outcomes and key themes
The following sections summarise the themes that were identified by the groups. There was a large amount of commonality in the comments made by the different stakeholders participating in the discussions, including consensus about the pressures faced by the service and how these might be addressed in the strategy for the future.
1. **Strengths of the current service**

It was clear from all discussions that the participants valued the service very highly and felt that it was highly valued by the library users. When asked what the strengths were, the following words and phrases were used by all groups:

- Great staff team
- Compassionate volunteers
- Accessible – strength of having local branches and providing outreach into communities
- Provision of mobile service
- Neutral - not seen as part of the Council
- Trusted
- Most of the services provided are free

Further probing led the groups to start to identify the strengths in more detail. This resulted in an emphasis on creativity, flexibility and developmental approaches, and commitment to customer care. The strongest common theme that was identified from the discussions was the role to promote, develop and support literacy across generations, abilities and communities. Literacy was discussed as being an important aspect of well-being as well as a skill needed to enable employment.

“Literacy is the bedrock of libraries – this includes ensuring a literate community exists for local and particularly new businesses”.

Whilst common themes between the different focus groups were identified, different emphases were also recognised. These are summarised as follows:

a) **Management team**

The discussion focused strongly on the strategic planning for the service and the need for partnerships with other council services and external agencies. For example:

- Work with different organisations across the borough
- Recognised as delivering a good service locally, regionally and nationally
- Seen as a platform for other council services
- Have an appetite for income generation and innovation
- People rely on us for support, e.g., mental health, job seekers, providing contact for isolated/other groups. Nuances of providing free space for individuals or groups
- More people engage with culture through libraries than other services – share expertise/information
- Good at community engagement
- Provide an opportunity for developing partnerships with other council services and with external agencies

The strengths of resources relating to the service were raised by the participants in two different ways, i.e. the resources that the library service provides to the community and the resources invested in the library service.

**Educational resources**, e.g.

- Information about how/where study
- Helping children and adults to read
- Resources for self-improvement
- Providing information (beginning of libraries)
- Reaching from the cradle to grave
Resources for businesses, e.g.
- Demographic information
- Information about council services such as planning
- Libraries have an impact on the economic development of the community

b) **Staff members**

The discussion focused more on the strengths of staff working within the service and the quality of service delivered. For example:

- Knowledgeable
- Customer service
- Flexible/adapt to change
- Committed to libraries
- Everyone goes over and above what is expected of them
- Achieve a lot on a little
- Lynch pin of the community providing advice
- Resources used for self improvement by individuals
- Help people back into work, e.g. through job clubs and free internet access
- Increasingly used as a contact point for other agencies, e.g. police and benefits advice
- Good community events, e.g. schools bringing special needs children in to learn how to use a library, book festival, summer reading
- Libraries seen as a ‘safe’ environment for everyone

c) **Volunteers**

The volunteers focused their discussion about the strengths of libraries primarily on the different services that are provided and their accessibility. For example:

- All libraries are different, to reflect the diversity of the local community
- The services are free
- Provision of Children’s Library and activities for children
- Reading groups
- Children and housebound are not fined if books are late
- Grandparents can borrow books for visiting grand children
- Book night
- Good connection with RNIB and great service providing/maintaining equipment for blind people
- Good effort made when books are requested
- Housebound benefit from having someone to visit and chat when books are delivered
- Volunteers are valued and recognised and invited to events/given discounts

2. **What are the current issues/challenges that need to be addressed?**

Whilst all participants provided much evidence and information about the strengths of the library service, they were also able to identify a number of key challenges and issues that currently exist within the service. They were asked to work in small groups and identify issues and challenges. They were then asked how these might be effectively addressed. In analysing the responses it became clear that there were five themes that all the discussions had identified.
i) Communications

The need for better internal and external communication was highlighted. For example, if staff are unaware of the priorities or direction of travel for the service, the public will also be uninformed about services. It was suggested that few members of the public were aware of the different services provided by the library service. Many assumed that they were solely book based and are unaware of technological developments. Services such as the home delivery service and some events are also poorly publicised. It was suggested that a clear communication and marketing strategy targeting staff, volunteers and councillors as well as members of the public would effectively address this issue. This should include identifying new methods of engaging staff and customers, e.g. through outreach, an updated and effective website and blog, as well as traditional methods of communication such as leaflets and posters. This strategic approach should be led by a specialist in communications and marketing employed specifically to develop this work within the service.

A number of staff asked questions about the new central library, including how and when information would communicated about how it would be used. They suggested that management should be more forthcoming about the new library and give staff a chance to have a say on the issues that will affect them within it.

Both staff and volunteers raised concerns about communication within the Library Service and what they considered to be a lack of information from management and the wider local authority during the current pressures. It was suggested that the lack of contact between groups of staff, i.e. senior managers, library assistants, and branch managers should be addressed by maintaining communications, increased visibility, and ensuring that communication has a clear focus.

There were also some comments made about the lack of understanding about the aims and objectives of the review and the need for clear and consistent internal information now and as it progresses.

ii) Resources

Concern about the resources invested in the Library Service was highlighted by all participants. Some staff stated that the service had experienced cuts in staffing, investment in books and other resources over the last 6 or 7 years, whilst other council services had experienced less substantial savings. Comments were made that if the current review resulted in further cuts, there was a risk that the service would no longer be viable. Staffing levels have already reached a point where further reductions would make it impossible to deliver an effective and knowledgeable service and there was a risk that the library would become an unsafe environment. It was suggested that the service could make better use of staff skills and knowledge within the current budget. There might also be an opportunity to change staff working practices, for example enabling staff to ‘act up’ when senior staff are not working, thus providing staff development opportunities.

Reductions in resources have already resulted in reduced opening hours and reductions in the availability of new stock in the branches. There is a risk that the current strength of positive public perception about the service will be undermined. As one group stated “it is difficult to maintain excellence”.

Some of the current branch libraries are in need of investment to improve the buildings and sustain an accessible environment for customers.

Many participants commented on the need for the service to set and communicate clearer priorities and ensure that staff and volunteers understand the pressures on resources and strategies which might be employed to address them. Whilst it was hoped that councillors would support the ongoing development of the service, it was suggested that if resources were reduced a decision should be taken to either reduce services to match the resources, or be clear the level of service to be provided and provide sufficient resources to achieve it.
The opportunities that partnerships with other organisations and council services could provide in enabling the libraries to develop were raised in these discussions. Whilst it was clear that many participants recognise the need and opportunities that co-locating a library/branch library with other services may bring, it was suggested that there should be an agreed minimum service that would be provided. This would prevent the library becoming a second-class service of a "couple of shelves of books in the corner with a pc".

The councillors were also concerned about resources, focusing their thoughts on how existing resources might be used most effectively. For example, they suggested that there was a need to look at issues/places such as Thorpe Dean and Shoebury. One suggestion was that in Thorpe Dean the service might look at moving the library into the youth centre. They stated that there was a need to look at the demographics of how branch libraries are used and relate this to other council buildings. This may enable the council to merge and redevelop the services and free up premises for other usage. They also suggested that it might be considered whether the delivery service could be expanded for working people to have books delivered if they paid a small fee, or pre-ordered books be dropped off by volunteers or mobile library at certain times.

iii) Staff

Many staff commented on the reduction in numbers employed over the past few years and the need for those staff that were employed to multi-task rather than specialise. There was a feeling that many had become 'jack of all trades and master of none' and that professional training was undervalued. The reduction in staffing meant that:

- there was no time to develop branches
- not enough time for outreach by staff
- not enough staff to run libraries adequately.

There were suggestions made about the need to recruit more staff and to make best use of the specialised skills and knowledge of staff.

The issue of safety was raised as a concern in both discussions with staff. It was suggested that over time there has been a change in library clientele in some areas as more people with mental health issues and social problems have started to use libraries. Sometimes their behaviour may be chaotic or aggressive and unpredictable. The current low levels of staffing have resulted in some staff feeling vulnerable and struggling to deal with their concerns. Other library customers have sometimes raised concerns about safety and the impact that anti-social behaviour within libraries might have. It was recommended that all staff and volunteers are provided with adequate training and development in dealing with the diverse groups that make use of libraries. It was also recommended that the standards of security in buildings were raised and rules about safe practices enforced. Whilst staff were clearly committed to equalities and valuing diversity within the community, there was a strong feeling that safety should not be compromised.

Other suggestions for addressing issues relating to the low levels of staff and the poor morale amongst staff included:

- review opening hours
- use volunteers more creatively within branches
- review current staffing levels across the whole service
- provide relief staff on a higher grade to cover different absences
- providing better training of staff and encouragement for achieving professional qualifications.
iv) Volunteers

The role of volunteers was recognised as an important part of the library service by all the groups. Volunteers may have more time to spend with customers and their involvement in the children’s service, home delivery service, and talking books was recognised as invaluable. However, a number of challenges were identified that should be addressed.

a) Safety of volunteers providing home delivery – not all volunteers were aware of what to do if they could not see the customer they were delivering too. It was suggested that all volunteers should have a contact number that they could call if they have problems out on delivery, and a nominated person within the branch that they could speak to.

b) Whilst volunteers provide an important service they need supervision, and management and support. The service needs to recognise the role and contribution volunteers provide in enhancing the libraries. A volunteer manager post should be established to steer how we use and support volunteers.

c) Some volunteers find it difficult to choose books for customers and would value help and advice, e.g. an older lady finding books for a younger, disabled man

d) Parking situation at Leigh library – volunteers don’t want to get parking tickets when collecting books even if the library will support their appeal. The lack of parking causes anxiety and stress for volunteers and puts some of them off volunteering. Better liaison with traffic wardens and designated loading bay would help.

e) Since the new electronic system there are no records about what books/audio/dvd that housebound people have received which makes it difficult for volunteers to choose for them. This really needs to be addressed as it affects the credibility of the service.

v) Technology

The issue of technology dominated a lot of the discussions. It was recognised that changes in technology have influenced how many customers want to use library services and that services need to adapt. However, the use of technology means that information and equipment need to be kept up to date if an effective service is to be provided. New services such as the provision of e books and wifi should also be considered and implemented.

A large number of criticisms were made of the current IT facilities, in terms of reliability and accessibility and also the provision of usage data. In particular, the Vubis system was highly criticised for not working effectively causing wasted time and a lot of frustration. It was stated that the computer system has not worked properly since July 2012. It is always crashing and takes a long time to be fixed. It is difficult for staff to have to constantly work with this and to have to explain this to customers. More effort should be invested into finding the appropriate systems and equipment for the job and funding should be released to enable this to happen. There is a sense of concern that the Council is bound to have the same system as Essex County Council and therefore has no influence over the quality or support of delivery. This is not just an issue of an unreliable system the SLA with Essex needs to meet the needs of people in Southend. “The partnership with Essex means that we don’t get the statistics on some electronic data. We need to get data so we can plan efficiently”. At the moment there is little confidence in the system and this has a big effect on staff morale. Morale might be improved if action is taken and progress on addressing problems communicated to staff. It would also be useful for in-house ICT staff to be available, especially on Saturday’s.
It was reported that many members of the public are unhappy with the new automated returns system. The new automated service has also put a registered blind volunteer and her friends off using the library as they can’t use the equipment and find it embarrassing constantly causing a logjam when they bring resources back. It would be helpful if there was some support easily available to prevent this happening.

The councillors discussed the need for clear data about what the people entering libraries are doing and what services they are using (not just borrowing books). This suggestion was also discussed by staff although there was some indication that the current technology and processes are unable to provide this level of detail about activities at present.

vi) Other issues raised

In addition to the five themes above, other challenges were raised and discussed within the groups.

The public perception of libraries was considered to be a challenge that the review should consider, especially how to make libraries appealing to younger people. The primary user groups are currently parents with very young children and older people. Whilst many customers do not fit into these groups it was recognised that teenagers and young people rarely make use of libraries. If libraries are to be seen as key community facilities or community hubs it will be important to talk to young people and find ways of adapting the service to make it more appealing. Provision of e books and wifi may be a step towards achieving this but the environment needs to be more accessible to young people.

Likewise the volunteers suggested that parents of children at play group and school could be encouraged to come to libraries. Currently there is good pre-school library usage but this disappears once children start school.

Concerned was raised by some volunteers about the use of ‘paid volunteers’ during the summer to support the services for children, who have little experience of the library service or of developing literacy. It was suggested that some volunteers could be better used.

Discussions took place about the potential for libraries to work more in partnership with other services within the Council, other public sector organisations and the private sector. This was echoed by councillors. It was also suggested that the profile of the service should be raised and developed with the Health and Wellbeing Board, given the breadth of services currently and potentially provided through libraries.

3. What services might look like in the future

The participants were asked to imagine the Library Service in 3 years time and to identify the key features about the service. They were asked to include a record of what they thought success might look like. Below are some of the suggestions discussed by the focus groups.

The common view was that the new library would provide the hub of the service with various approaches to delivery provided within community settings. These include continuing the home delivery service, continuing to use the mobile service in certain parts of the Borough and continuing to deliver children’s outreach and events.

It was suggested that better recognition of the diversity of services by the council and public in the future would enable better use of the resources available.

Development of the role of volunteers, whilst ensuring that they did not just replace trained staff, was also identified and agreed.
Most participants suggested that branch or community based libraries should be seen as community spaces, possibly delivering a number of council services.

Many of the participants described the system of the future as ‘flexible’, referring to the need for flexibility amongst staff and volunteers as well as flexibility in the use of resources. There was clear consensus that this could not be achieved without good communication and marketing and reliable technology.

Councillors suggested that a successful future service would include

a) People using the service
b) A service that evolves – isn’t blinkered to be based just on buildings
c) Based around the central library with ‘part-time’ libraries around the borough incorporated with other services
d) Link with educational facilities
e) Possibly linked with churches or faith groups
f) There needs to be a role for the community although volunteers can’t be expected to undertake the roles of paid staff who are dedicated professionals with specialist knowledge.
Questions and comments about the review process

At the end of the focus groups participants were asked if they would like to make any comments on the review process.

Concern was raised about the lack of involvement of library staff in the planning of the review, and in particular in developing the public questionnaire. A number of concerns were made about the length, language and accessibility of the questionnaire and some of the objectivity of the questions.

There was some perception that the Council would do what it wants regardless of people’s comments.

Finally, participants asked that more information be shared with staff and volunteers about the review as it progresses.

Conclusions

This report summarises the outcomes of the discussions held on 7th and 8th January. The participants were keen to be engaged in the review and to share their knowledge about the library service and suggestions for how it might effectively be developed in the future. There was an element of realism in the discussions, with participants recognising the current resource pressures on Southend Borough Council and trying to identify solutions that made the most effective use of existing investment into the service.

There was a strong level of consensus between the participants about the challenges for the service as well as its strengths. Concerns about the current levels of internal and external communication, issues with the current information technology, and lack of available data to enable service planning were heard repeatedly. Concern was also raised repeatedly about the need to achieve a balance between the use of paid staff and the use of volunteers. Likewise, it was clear that there was a strong commitment amongst participants to help find solutions and sustain the library service in the future.

Participants were keen for the information collected from the discussions to be used to inform the review by the Cultural Advisory Working Party, and would like to be kept informed as the review develops.

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