Scrutiny & Overview Committee – 17 September 2024

Feedback from a meeting with Friends Groups on the Libraries Review

Ahead of the Cabinet considering the recommendations set out in the Libraries Review report at their meeting on 25 September 2024, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee has been given the opportunity to review the proposals at their meeting on 17 September 2024. To inform their questioning, the Committee arranged to meet with local community groups supporting the four libraries (Bradmore Green, Broad Green, Sanderstead and Shirley) that had been identified for possible closure, to discuss their views on the consultation process and the proposals.

The meeting was held remotely via Microsoft Teams on Thursday, 12 September 2024, with the Scrutiny & Overview Committee members, Councillors Rowenna Davis (C), Alasdair Stewart (VC), Leila Ben Hassel (DC) and Eunice O'Dame in attendance to listen to the feedback from community representatives covering the four libraries identified for possible closure.

From the feedback provided, there were a number of key themes identified, namely the consultation process, equalities implications, mitigation, alternative proposals, financial implications including cost/benefits of the proposal. To allow easy analysis, the feedback from the meeting has been grouped under these themes below.

General

- It was highlighted that the original report from the Activist Group had indicated that the evidence provided in terms of usage data may be unreliable. Discrepancies had also been noted in the usage data presented across different reports, which raised concern about the accuracy of the data used and led to questions about whether the Council had a clear understanding of the usage of its library facilities.

- It was questioned whether any consideration had been given to the impact of covid on library usage?

- It was felt that the strengths of the four libraries identified for closure had been underplayed in the report, such as Sanderstead Library being the third best used.

- It was advised that there was a restrictive covenant on Shirley Library, which specified that a library be built and maintained on the site. If the library was closed and an alternate used found for the site, it could be in breach of this covenant.

- There were questions about whether the Council had already started to market the sites to developers.

Consultation Process.

- It was highlighted that the overwhelming majority of respondents to the consultation had indicated that they did not want libraries to close. As the closure of four libraries was being proposed, it raised concern about whether the results of the consultation had been considered.

- It was advised that the proposals set out in the report were similar to what had been proposed in the earlier consultant's reports and as such it was questioned whether the consultation had resulted in any changes.

- It was highlighted that thousands of people had signed various petitions against proposed closures and as such it was questioned whether any account had been taken of these.

- There was concern raised about how the consultation had been advertised and how many residents knew it was taking place.

- There was some concern raised about how the questions in the consultation were structured, with there being a perception that it had been designed towards an intended outcome.

Equalities Implications

- There was widespread concern about the potential impact of library closures on vulnerable residents. For instance, it was highlighted that Shirley Library had a high proportion of elderly users, with 43% indicating in the consultation they would not be able to use another location.

- The impact of potential library closure on older people was a common thread, but the impact upon young parents was also a concern.

- It was highlighted that Bradmore Green was one of the most accessible libraries in the borough, which resulted in people traveling from across the borough to use its facilities as a result.

- The alternate proposal for Bradmore Green users to use the Coulsdon Library instead was not realistic due to the hill and busy bus services. It was also highlighted that the availability of disabled parking spaces at Coulsdon Library was limited.

- It was highlighted that the cost of travel to alternate library services would be a significant barrier to users on low incomes.

Mitigation

- It was noted that the report mentioned the possibility of using church venues to provide alternative provision, but there was a concern about whether users would want to access libraries in faith based settings.

- There was a view that the mitigations set out in the report lacked detail, particularly around how they would address the loss of service for residents with protected characteristics.

- It was highlighted that a one day a week bus service should not be considered an adequate replacement for a three day a week library service.

- It was questioned whether some of the alternative options for providing library facilities, such as schools, had been informed they were being identified as alternate options.

- It was noted that the provision of a mobile library service was not helpful for people wanting to use the library service to access technology or other services.

- It was highlighted that libraries were often used as warm spaces for vulnerable residents and also safe spaces for young people.

Alternative Proposals

- It was questioned why the possibility of expanding the library offer had only been explored at certain libraries and not at others.

- It was felt there had been a lack of detail provided to understand how local communities could support the running of their libraries.

- Apart from providing a library service, the facilities were also used by local community groups providing services that benefitted residents. As such it was questioned whether the loss of these had been considered and whether support to find alternate facilities would be provided.

- It was highlighted that reduced opening hours had had a significant impact on usage and whether alternatives for expanding the service or providing access to the service at more convenient times had been explored.

Financial Implication - Cost/Benefits of the Proposal

- It was highlighted that the report mentioned that some of the library facilities would require extensive repairs, which could not be funded. There was a understanding that Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding had previously been allocated for library maintenance and as such it was questioned why this was not being used.

- It was advised that any potential savings delivered through the closure would not make up for the loss of community facilities.

- It was questioned whether the possibility of obtaining external funding to help maintain the service had been explored.

- It was highlighted that Broad Green Library was one of the cheapest to run, as it was one of the smallest.

- It was highlighted that libraries helped to keep people socially connected and well. As such it was questioned whether there had been any engagement with Social Care as part of the review about the potential impact of closure upon vulnerable residents.