



City of Westminster

Cabinet Report

Decision Maker:	Cabinet
Date:	10 July 2017
Classification:	General Release
Title:	Chinese library service – Response to Petition
Wards Affected:	St James's
Key Decision:	No
Financial Summary:	No financial implication
Report of:	Executive Director for City Management and Communities

1. Executive Summary

1.1 The Council's library service includes provision of Chinese language materials, resources and activities primarily based at Charing Cross library. As part of the remodelling of the service, to save £750,000 in revenue costs and ensure it is sustainable for the future, there have been changes made to the way the library service operates. These were implemented from 3 April 2017.

1.2 On 22 April 2017, the Council received a petition from an organisation called the Friends of Charing Cross Library, signed by 992 signatories, entitled "Maintain the same quality of Chinese library as before", which had been started on 15 March. It stated:

"We believe that the Chinese Community is deeply dismayed with the funding cut to the Westminster Chinese Library, the largest public Chinese library in the UK. The Chinese library draws 70% of readers to the Charing Cross Library and is the main reason why this library welcomes the most readers compared to any other library in Westminster. We demand that: 1. The service to the Chinese community to be maintained to the same level as how it was before the budget cut. 2. An Equality Impact Assessment should be initiated before the implementation of the restructuring. 3. The Council has a duty to genuinely consult the Chinese Community, local residents and all users regarding the restructuring of the Chinese service.

On 2 June, officers met with the petition organiser and were handed a further paper-based petition. As between 500 and 10,000 of the signatories to the online petition are based in Westminster a requirement for a report to the Cabinet has been triggered. This report responds to the issues raised in the petition.

- 1.3 The Council has already carried out a transformation programme for its library service resulting in a reduction in overall running costs to ensure value for money and to meet financial targets as part of medium term planning.
- 1.4 Because the impacts of the transformation programme are mainly on staffing, and the Council is committed to maintaining a high quality of library service, a full equalities impact assessment (EIA) and consultation with the public was not deemed necessary. However, officers recognise the importance of communicating openly and transparently with communities about change and will ensure that this is the case where future changes have public impact.
- 1.5 Officers will actively engage with the Friends of Charing Cross Library group, and other community groups, to ensure they are able to have input to the development of library services in future.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. That the Cabinet :
 - a. **Note** the receipt of a petition relating to the Chinese library service at Charing Cross library.
 - b. **Endorse** the actions set out in the report as the response to the petition and the petitioners be advised accordingly.

3. Reasons for Decision

- 3.1 The report seeks confirmation that the Cabinet is confident in the decision making process that was in place in relation to the changes to the library service and that officers should continue to engage with a wide range of Chinese community groups in relation to the library service.

4. Background, including Policy Context

- 4.1 The Council has already carried out a transformation programme for its library service resulting in a reduction in overall running costs in line with requirements of its medium term financial planning. The aims of the programme included to reduce the library service running costs by £750,000: despite this, on spend per resident, Westminster remains the highest spending council in England on library services. The Council also committed to retaining its 12 library sites and maintaining their long opening hours, which are important for access to the

service. This is at a time when other councils are closing libraries, drastically reducing opening hours or handing libraries to volunteers to run in their entirety.

- 4.2 The review was carried out to both save money and modernise the service. This resulted in changes to the roles and responsibilities of libraries staff and a reduction in the number of posts within the service from 117 full time equivalent to 101.
- 4.3 Cost reduction is in the context of continuously reducing government grant, and that libraries are a statutory service which have to be provided free at point of use. Maintaining a high quality of service that the public who use libraries receive was also a key consideration and careful thought was given by Members and officers as to how best to achieve this.
- 4.4 The service has reduced costs primarily by streamlining the staffing structure, where the bulk of costs lie. It has reduced the number of staff employed in the service by “delaying” the management and focusing on key customer-facing activities, and moving to more flexible job roles. This is in line with practice adopted by other local authority library services, although Westminster’s level of resourcing remains above average.
- 4.5 Library services for the Chinese community were considered as part of the service as a whole. Changes that were made to the staffing of the library service are not expected to have a significant impact on the service to users, and where there are any adverse effects, steps will be taken to mitigate these. Since the change was to the management and deployment of staff, officers conducted a preliminary EIA but a full EIA was not deemed necessary. All staff were consulted extensively on the change during a 12 week period in autumn 2016, and no specific feedback relating to the Chinese library service was received during this consultation.
- 4.6 Officers were aware of the services used by Chinese residents, including provision of books and other resources, space for reading, study and events, and outreach. They considered how best to ensure the continuation of a high quality service, whilst better deploying staff resources and making the savings. To ensure the library service can continue to offer a good service, libraries management have ensured:
 - There will continue to be staff with appropriate language skills based at Charing Cross library.
 - Changes in the Chinese community (eg the greater preponderance of Mandarin-speakers compared to Cantonese in the past) will be reflected in the service.

- The newly constituted community and volunteer relationship team will prioritise outreach work with the Chinese community in the West End, recognising the significance of the Chinese community, which makes up 3% of the Westminster population total (and a much larger community which works or uses the West End as a focus of its cultural activity) whilst also seeking to address other community need for library services in the City.
- The service will also seek to further improve links with the Chinese community in respect to volunteering and engagement with the service

5. Response to the petition

- 5.1 Following receipt of the petition, officers have been in dialogue with the Friends of Charing Cross library group, and have met with them. The meeting was an opportunity to air concerns by the group and for officers to reassure them that there will continue to be high quality provision of Chinese library resources and services in Westminster. An ongoing dialogue was agreed.
- 5.2 As recommended above, Cabinet is asked to note the petition, the impact of the changes already implemented, and commitments made to the organisers regarding the future of Chinese library provision and to continuing engagement. Cabinet is asked to endorse the approach set out in this report. This will be fully communicated to the petition organiser and the Friends of Charing Cross library group.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 This report has no financial implications.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1 This report has no legal implications

8. Outstanding issues

- 8.1 None

**If you have any queries about this Report please contact:
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