

Communities & Customer Services Policy & Scrutiny Committee

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Classification:	General Release
Title:	Libraries Service – Report of the Independent Libraries Advisory Board and Development of Future Strategic Direction for the Service
Report of:	Sara Sutton, Executive Director City Management and Communities
Cabinet Member Portfolio	Sports, Culture and Community
Wards Involved:	All
Policy Context:	City that offers excellent local services
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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Council established an independent advisory board to provide it with external advice on the long term future for the library service. The board's role was to consider all internal and external challenges and opportunities, and to make recommendations for how the council and the service could best prepare for the future, making the most of resources and expenditure to deliver key outcomes.
- 1.2. Following a comprehensive work programming spanning many months, the Libraries Advisory Board published its findings and its specific recommendations to the council. The report (attached at appendix 1) was received by the Council's Cabinet on 25 March 2019. As it is an independent report, the council is not obliged to adopt its recommendations, but is invited to consider and respond. The Committee is likewise asked for its views and any comments on the report.

- 1.3. The publication of this independent report provides us with a valuable perspective on the future of Westminster's library and archive services but we want to hear views from everyone who uses our libraries – and those that work to deliver the services in a daily basis – so that they can play an active role in shaping the libraries they want in their community. An extensive programme of engagement and consultation is therefore planned, to bring staff, users, residents and a range of other stakeholders into the conversation.
- 1.4. In line with the views of the board it was agreed that the first major step in this engagement process should focus on libraries staff. They will be crucial not only to the process of developing the future strategy for the service, but also delivering it on the ground. With the aim of capturing their unique perspective and expertise, three dedicated workshop sessions took place in libraries around the city in May. Libraries and Archives staff at all levels were invited to consider the findings and recommendations of the independent board, giving their views on feasibility and generating additional ideas or anything they feel the board might have missed. The sessions were well attended and interactive. Outputs from those workshops are now being written up and will be analysed as we progress with further engagement and review. A further session is being planned to engage additional staff across other council services, to recognise the cross-portfolio nature of this work. Once this has been completed there will be a full write up of feedback from the staff engagement phase. This can be made available to member of the Committee at the end of July, if desired.
- 1.5. Another important stage of the engagement process will be understanding the views of Councillors. Dedicated Members' engagement sessions are being scheduled - dates will be finalised as soon as possible but current proposals are for 26 June and the week commencing 22 July 2019. As indicated by the breadth of the board's recommendations, which reach right across all City for All themes, there are potential links and opportunities relating almost every Cabinet portfolio. The board was emphatic about the value of libraries engaging and working with all council departments to understand how they can deliver on strategic priorities together. With this in mind we are keen to involve Members across all portfolios and areas of interest, to help us to develop our future vision in a collaborative way.
- 1.6. There are plans to hold a stakeholder engagement event, also proposed for July, which will involve key partners and interested parties in the process. The aim is to engage with a wide range of organisations and groups that have an interest in public library provision, some of whom have already had some contact with the Advisory Board and its work. Through these sessions we will gather fresh perspectives from key stakeholders and raise awareness of the work that Westminster is doing to develop the future of its libraries service.
- 1.7. Finally, there will of course be extensive engagement with Westminster's residents and library users themselves. With a range of activities proposed to take place in libraries right across the city in the coming weeks and months, we aim to gather comments, ideas and feedback from everyone who uses libraries and had an interest in their future. We want to understand nuances in views across different neighbourhoods, and identify wider themes, to ensure that our

developing strategy reflects the wants and needs of the community. This underlines the council's commitment to enabling people to have a real voice – and an ongoing role – in shaping their own local libraries and archive services.

- 1.8. Key issues the Committee may wish to consider, including our plans for consultation and engagement, are detailed in section 5 below. Feedback from the Committee will inform the council's response and developing strategy for the libraries service in Westminster.

2. Background

- 2.1. The independent Libraries Advisory Board was set up by the Council at a time of change and challenge for public libraries nationally and in Westminster. The Council faces significant financial pressures and libraries may have to increase commercial income, reduce costs and deliver services differently. Nationally, public library use has been in long term decline, although Westminster shows some signs of bucking that trend, it is vital to consider how to keep the service relevant and cost effective.
- 2.2. There is a statutory requirement to provide a library service, but the extent of the service is up to local councils to determine and variation in service levels and models of delivery is considerable across authorities in London and more widely. Westminster provides over and above what most London boroughs offer and its per capita spend is the highest in the country. The council faces a challenging financial environment where efficiency is vital, and the service will need to build on its previous track record for innovation to ensure it is sustainable and fit for the future.
- 2.3. Library use is changing. As the board noted, fewer than a quarter of library users now borrows a book on their visit. Westminster's library users are more likely to be there for events, information (including referral to other public services) or study. This gives rise to challenges for the service – to provide more materials in a wider range of formats than ever before, and different spaces for different uses. This means meeting diverse needs in one place - at its most simplistic separating noisy events such as under-5s sessions from those who want quiet study.
- 2.4. The challenge to the service, then, is to continue to provide for existing uses (already a diverse range in its own right) and develop new offers that will keep libraries relevant to a broad range of the population, including the provision of new libraries to replace existing outmoded services, at a time of continuing financial pressure.

3. The Libraries Board's Recommendations

- 3.1. The independent Libraries Advisory Board published its report and recommendations for the future of Westminster's library services in March 2019.

The recommendations acknowledge and reflect the capacity for libraries to act as a key driver for all five of the core City for All themes, as follows:

- 3.1.1. **Libraries help make Westminster a city of opportunity** – driving literacy and digital literacy and supporting local prosperity. The board sees two potential strands of work here – one focusing closely on libraries’ primary, traditional purpose of increasing literacy, encouraging reading and education in a range of forms. There is an emphasis on improving our digital offer, using technology to support inclusion, connectivity and lifelong learning. The second strand of this recommendation focuses on supporting local enterprise and the business community. The board urges the city council to develop a specific strategy for skills development, business and entrepreneurship and to build relationships with key partners to deliver this. They specifically recommend that Westminster should define a package of employment support to be delivered at each library as part of the core offer, including a range of basic support with job search, CV and application writing, and presentational skills. Specialist career advice could be offered to complement this. The council may wish to seek inspiration from innovations such as the British Library’s Business and IP Centre, which supports small business owners, entrepreneurs and inventors to develop their skills, network and grow their businesses.
- 3.1.2. **Libraries help support a city that provides excellent local services** – by providing a place that helps make things happen. Here the board saw an opportunity for libraries to act as a key enabler for driving efficiency in other service. They noted that other council services stand to benefit significantly from working through and with libraries and that this, alongside libraries looking at commercialisation and fundraising opportunities as a given, should be something the council actively pursues.
- 3.1.3. **Libraries become a visible advocate for a caring and fairer city** – being accessible spaces that foster community spirit. As trusted places with remarkable reach into the community, the board saw libraries as playing a key role in tackling the ‘loneliness epidemic’. They also emphasised the importance of supporting some of the most vulnerable in society, such as those who are not in a secure housing situation, and becoming dementia friendly spaces. They recognised a potential need for physical changes to buildings and suggested that libraries could look to alternative funding sources to facilitate this.
- 3.1.4. **Libraries help make a healthier and greener city** – acting as a key resource for social prescribing and referrals. The board felt this was about working with partners, whether council colleagues on Making Every Contact Count or connecting with our physical activity strategies, or with academic institutions such as UCL. The board’s specific suggestions including trialling fresh approaches for effective community-based treatments for adult and adolescent depression, dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. This would build on work such as Wakefield’s dementia-friendly library, and the new approach to under-5 ‘rhymetime’ sessions being developed by the Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians, which has a focus on better mental health outcomes. Also, in the context of family hubs, to look at how libraries could provide targeted ‘pop-up’ services to support the development and learning among families with

young children. The board also felt that libraries could impact on the council's 'greener' aspirations through things like community gardening, but and by generally acting as a key agent for behaviour change within the community.

- 3.1.5. **Libraries and archives should be focal points for celebrating citizenship, heritage and community based arts and culture** – the board were keen to see libraries as the first place for people to engage with arts, culture and heritage. The board recommended that libraries continue to encourage local arts and culture, making use of digital opportunities to connect with wider audiences and setting ambitious targets for engagement, especially those who might not otherwise access these types of opportunity. There is the specific suggestion that the council might identify a dedicated budget and programme to foster and support local creative talent through libraries.
- 3.2. Within this context the board urges the council to make use of the high levels of trust and accessibility to do more through the library service, working in partnership across key council services to make links and integrate service offers in new ways. This is a key finding of Connecting Libraries, the board's report. The board also recommends infrastructure and service are modernised to achieve this, and a review of assets, services and delivery so that we can ensure the right services are offered in the right places achieving quality and value for money. The board noted a need to balance continuing financial pressure with what would be lost if services simply reduce, while also being aware of the need to respond to social and cultural changes so that Westminster's libraries can be sustainable, relevant and fit for the future. These ideas are explored in more detail in sections 2.12 – 2.17 of the board's report.
- 3.3. Where we are already making progress – there are areas where the service is innovating or progressing along the lines indicated. These include:
- Improving the e-book offer and introducing a new and improved MyLibrary app, helping people to access library collections more easily.
 - Introducing affordable flexible working ("hub") space at Westminster Reference Library as a three month pilot, which may extend to other libraries in future. (Please see attached social media promotions for this initiative – background note 2).
 - Starting a trial allowing people to donate money electronically when the attend an event or wish to support their library.
 - Extending Making Every Contact Count training to further library staff after an initial 100 were trained last year, with staff able to help people who need referrals to other council and health services.

4. Involvement of the Policy & Scrutiny Committee

- 4.1. The Education, Leisure and Community Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee considered the Board's approach in autumn 2017 and provided some suggestions for areas it should consider. These were:
- The way that digital technology had changed the role of libraries and would continue to change it in the future.

- The diversity of library users in Westminster and the importance of looking at how the service could meet the needs of different users in different parts of the City.
 - The role of libraries as a trusted space offering support, advice and access to services, and the role that library staff play in delivering this.
 - Examples of ‘best practice’ elsewhere, and different models of provision.
- 4.2. The monthly meetings of the Libraries Advisory Board were planned with a thematic approach, giving a structured and comprehensive work programme. This enabled each of the topics highlighted by the P&S Committee to benefit from focused consideration and many points arising from these debates are reflected within the board’s final report and recommendations.

Effective Use of Digital

- 4.3. At a session dedicated to the future role of digital in library services the board heard about the work of Kent’s Arts and Libraries service on digital inclusion – especially for older people – with a view to tackling isolation, and from Wimbletech CIC who offer workspace and connectivity in libraries for local entrepreneurs. A presentation from Kings College Library also highlighted opportunities to modernise library and archive services with digital solutions such as online content, flexible location working and increased self-service. In its final report the board reflects on the value of maintaining libraries as a focal point at the heart of the community, for local businesses as well as residents. The board urges the council to strike a balance, utilising technological solutions which enhance that role rather than compromise it. These issues are looked at in most detail in strands one and two of the first recommendation (page 17-19) of the report.

Meeting the Needs of a Diverse Community

- 4.4. The Advisory Board was frequently reminded of the diversity of the communities our libraries serve and the range of roles and functions they have in people’s lives. The board noted that libraries have unusual breadth of accessibility and of appeal. The wide range of services, many of which are provided free of charge, and the welcoming, non-stigmatising environment, mean that libraries attract people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds. The board was struck by libraries’ important role in engaging people, bringing them together to learn and share experiences, and in promoting interest in local history and heritage. Libraries’ role in fostering community spirit, connectedness and shared experiences is referenced under recommendation three (page 22-23) of the report.
- 4.5. Equally board members were interested in ways to build flexibility into the service model, to ensure libraries meet specific local needs. They considered options around providing a ‘core’ of basic services across all sites, layering on top some more customised elements to address specific requirements in

individual neighbourhoods. The board has indicated an interest in how these concepts could be developed further.

Libraries as a Trusted Place

- 4.6. The board were struck by the level of trust many service users place in libraries as somewhere they can find information, seek support and navigate the wider council services landscape. Libraries can offer a place and a voice for some of the most vulnerable in society and in their report the board highlights how this directly aligns with the council's City for All vision. Board members were keenly aware of the responsibility libraries have to ensure libraries are, as a given, as accessible as possible. This is highlighted under recommendation three (page 22) on the need for any new libraries to be "inclusive from go" as a core part of their ethos, underlining their view that the service should always seek to be proactive in its approach to inclusion.
- 4.7. This also relies heavily on libraries staff to champion the approach. Whatever the Council's response to the Advisory Board's recommendations, engagement and active involvement by staff is essential and requires them to act as advocates for the libraries within communities.

Best Practice and Delivery Models

- 4.8. Learning from others was a central part of the board's approach, and through its thematic sessions the group sought perspectives from central government, local authorities around the country, academic institutions and others. Some of the partners the board heard from included:
- London Borough of Lewisham, which runs some of its libraries in partnership with voluntary organisations having made an "open call" to the voluntary sector to become involved. The service has been able to reduce its costs whilst increasing visitor numbers. At the same meeting, Hammersmith and Fulham Citizens' Advice talked about running a library using its volunteers along with support and advice from the council, at its main office and advice centre.
 - Libraries Unlimited, an employee-led social enterprise and trust, which spun out of Devon County Council and now provides the library service for Devon and neighbouring Torbay unitary authority. The key takeaway was the passion for a high quality service and ability to invest in staff with training and development focused on their service and user needs.
 - Kings College London, which gave a different perspective with a strong focus on the student as the customer, leading them to extend opening dramatically and change working practices.
- 4.9. The board also engaged with directorate leads across the council to hear about their experiences of working with libraries to deliver their departmental objectives libraries – and what more could be done - and conducted visits to libraries and archives in many of Westminster's neighbourhoods to witness the services first hand. This evidence-based approach, which was recommended by the Committee, enabled the board to develop a robust and informed view of

the factors that tend to make a well run library. They captured much of their learning in a detailed appendix to their final report (attached at appendix 3), which, along with references to many case studies throughout the document, show how an understanding what has worked elsewhere underpins the board recommendations to the service here in Westminster.

5. Key Matters for the Committee's Consideration

- 5.1. The Committee is asked to note this update on the progress of the Libraries Advisory Board and its response to the specific points raised by the Committee in 2017.
- 5.2. As a key consultee in the process of responding to the board's recommendations and shaping the long term strategy for library services in Westminster, the Committee is further invited to consider the following:
 - The advisory board makes a number of recommendations aligned with the five core City for All themes. Does the Committee have views on any of the recommendations?
 - In line with an overall vision of 'Connecting Libraries' the board recommends that libraries work to strengthen links and drive service integration with departments across the council, capitalising on their accessibility and trust relationship with the community to engage people in a range of local services. Does the Committee have any views on particular areas of opportunity for this?
 - Does the Committee have views on the proposals for engagement and consultation?
 - Is there anything additional that the Committee feels not been covered, or fully covered, in the board's explorations of the issue so far, which the council might usefully consider as it develops its future strategy?

**If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the
Background Papers, please contact Mike Clarke**
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APPENDICES

1. Connected Libraries: Report of the Independent Libraries Advisory Board to Westminster City Council – Full version
2. Connected Libraries: Report of the Independent Libraries Advisory Board to Westminster City Council – Summary version
3. Appendix to the board report – Precis of Minutes of Board Sessions

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Background briefing 1: *Background on Westminster's Library and Archive Services*

Background briefing 2: *Promotion of flexible work space initiative at Westminster Reference Library*