

Minutes of the Corporate and Communities

Overview and Scrutiny Panel

County Hall Worcester

Thursday, 8 June 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Emma Stokes (Chairman), Cllr Emma Marshall (Vice Chairman),
Cllr James Stanley, Cllr Peter Griffiths, Cllr Natalie McVey and
Cllr Richard Udall

Also attended:

Cllr Marcus Hart, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities

Paul Robinson, Chief Executive
Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change
Mark Fitton, Strategic Director for People
Hannah Perrott, Assistant Director for Communities
Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer
Jonathan Fitzgerald-Guy, Assistant Director Transformation and Commercial
Carol Brown, Head of Libraries, Archives and Archaeology
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Alison Spall, Overview and Scrutiny Officer

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 28 March 2023 (previously circulated).

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).

410 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and congratulated Councillor James Stanley on his appointment as Vice Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board and Councillor Emma Marshall on her appointment as Vice Chairman of this Panel.

Apologies for absence were received from Panel Member Councillor Craig Warhurst and Councillor Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication.

411 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

Councillor Emma Marshall declared an interest in respect of Item 5 (Update on the Proposal to Relocate Redditch Library). Councillor Marshall advised that she was a member of Redditch Borough Council and that the library was located within her division. She was attending the meeting today in her capacity as a Worcestershire County Councillor and was therefore considering the Worcestershire wide perspective.

412 Public Participation

There were 2 public participants, David Munro and Oliver Hale who asked questions in relation to Agenda Item 5 - Update on the proposal to relocate Redditch library.

The Chairman thanked the speakers for their questions and confirmed that they would each receive a written response.

The Chairman also reported that there had been 3 other members of the public who had submitted comments on this same issue. Whilst they were not able to attend the meeting to address the Panel, the Chairman had circulated their comments to Panel members so that they were aware of the issues they raised.

413 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 28 March 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

414 Update on the Proposal to Relocate Redditch Library

The Panel received an update report on developments relating to progress on the proposed relocation of Redditch Library since the Cabinet report in October 2022, it also included reference to what information was still required before Cabinet could make an informed decision at its meeting in July 2023.

The Chairman advised that the Cabinet Member and Directors would be invited to provide initial introductory comments, following which Panel members would be given the opportunity to ask questions and make comments in respect of the 4 different areas of the report as follows:

- The public consultation process
- Commercial Arrangements
- Operational Services
- Collaborative Opportunities

General

The CMR advised that Worcestershire County Council (the Council) had a statutory responsibility for providing a library service and this was its main priority in these deliberations. The CMR and Cabinet colleagues would need to be satisfied that the finances of the proposed relocation made sense for the Council.

The CMR stressed that neither he nor his Cabinet colleagues had any pre-determined views on this matter and that he was in 'listening' mode. Due regard would be given to all of the individual consultation responses received as well as the views of this Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board on 26 June. The decision would be made at the Cabinet meeting in July which allowed plenty of time for all the above to be given careful consideration.

The Assistant Director for Communities provided an overview of the highlights of the report. There were 3 key areas of focus: commercial, operational and collaborative arrangements. Work was ongoing to ensure that the requirements in place to protect the Council's interests were fulfilled by the proposed arrangements.

The Panel was provided with details of the outcome of the public consultation launched in November 2022 until February 2023. The consultation had been widely advertised by a range of means including the website, social media, libraries and at bus stops. A total of 1467 responses had been received which represented 2.2% of the Redditch population aged over 19. Overall, 72.3% of respondents had disagreed to some extent with the proposed new location for the library. The Assistant Director highlighted the 3 most common themes in the responses received indicating that the second and third themes were key requirements for the Council:

1. That the proposed location was not as good
2. Concerns that there would be a reduction in the facilities offered by the new location
3. Concerns that the relocation would result in a reduction in the size of the new library

The Panel was informed that Redditch Borough Council (RBC) was seeking to mitigate some of the concerns raised by improving the shop mobility offer including access to mobility vehicles, blue badge car parking spaces and improved lighting on the walkways. In terms of the archives there was still work to be done and specific details of the space to be available at the new site were awaited from RBC.

The Panel was informed that in recent days, the updated heads of terms for the lease agreement had been received and the Council would be reviewing these before responding to RBC.

In terms of the space available at the proposed site, this report took into account all of the shared space. Whilst the overall space was broadly comparable to the current library, details needed to be checked to gain

assurance that there would be comparable useable space and to ensure that as many of the areas were open to the public as possible.

Confirmation had been received in writing from RBC that the baseline costs in 2022/23 would be used as a baseline for moving forward, and this would ensure that the Council would not be in a worse financial position.

The Strategic Director for Commercial and Change (C&C) highlighted that the Cabinet report from October 2022 had contained 5 commercial conditions which needed to be secured before matters could be moved forward. These included that the market value of the freehold for the current library site was retained, that the Council's overall costs/income position could not be made worse and that the relocation and associated costs would be covered by RBC.

The Assistant Director for Transformation and Communities (T&C) explained that the Council would be entering into a 125-year leasehold exchange with RBC. It was reported that the draft lease agreement had not yet been finalised and there was due diligence still to be done.

It was highlighted that as part of the wider Town Deal, the Council had asked RBC that they be included in public realm conversations and written confirmation of this was awaited. It was highlighted that if the library was to move to the Community Hub, there would be opportunities to collaborate with other organisations to be explored.

Public Consultation Process

The following main points were noted:

- It was confirmed that updated floor plans had been received but that they couldn't yet be signed off as certain requirements had not yet been reflected in the plans.
- In terms of the useable space at the proposed site, it was highlighted that an open plan multi-functional space was a specific requirement, but assurance on the detail was awaited at this stage.
- It was agreed that floor plans were needed in advance of the OSPB, in particular the overall useable space, the specific layout of the children's and young persons' areas and the size and flexibility of the multi-functional space.
- The nearest bus stops to the Town Hall site were indicated to be very close, but exact locations would be provided after the meeting.
- The proposed designs were accessibility compliant and an improvement on the current arrangements. It was noted that the floor plans would enable Members to be reassured about the improved access measures.
- In terms of archives, it was explained that the Hive had strong rooms where the bulk of County archives were stored securely. The Council was working with the Redditch local history group to put forward a collaborative plan and prioritise the destination of the archives. It was explained that it was the intention that those items of most interest to the local people at Redditch would remain within the town. The size and nature of the storage space to be made available at Redditch was still to

be determined. If relocation did not proceed, it was confirmed that some of the archives would still need to be moved to the Hive.

- The Panel was assured that security for the children's area had been given careful consideration in terms of location, but also ensuring good accessibility. The arrangement of spaces and ensuring lines of sight between fixtures was also being carefully considered for the security of all vulnerable people.
- It was reported that a dedicated young persons' area was being created as an alternative space for older children,
- With regard to the consultation exercise, the Assistant Director for Communities advised that extensive publicity had been carried out to engage with the residents of Redditch and the Council had been as transparent as possible throughout this process.
- It was highlighted that the OSPB had met in Redditch Town Hall last October and the issues raised by residents had been taken forward for the Cabinet report at that time and were covered in this report too.
- Two consultation meetings had taken place, which had been well attended. There had been a number of social media posts to advertise the process, of which the Assistant Director agreed to obtain precise numbers. The survey had been made available in several languages and hard copies had been made available at libraries. The Panel was advised that whilst library staff had to be impartial, they had been briefed to respond to any queries raised with them and to encourage those residents to provide their feedback. The Assistant Director agreed to check if information was available of the split between surveys completed online and in person. It was also clarified that posters which had been displayed in January had then unfortunately been removed and had to be put up again.
- Given the responses received from the consultation exercise, a Member queried whether the advantages of the proposed move for local people had been clearly conveyed. Members were referred to the positive feedback received from some residents which was detailed in the report. The feedback included that the new location was only a short distance away, it was an effective use of buildings, they were happy to have the library as part of a hub with services all in one place, the move to a new location could include new, modern facilities and the new location could be more accessible.
- The Assistant Director for Communities confirmed that the Council's legal team had been involved with this project and that due process had been followed.
- The CMR was asked whether the high percentage of opposition to the proposal, obtained through the consultation process would influence his opinion. He confirmed that the Cabinet would have due regard to the consultation responses and that he couldn't predict the outcome. The legal processes would be followed properly, and all information considered carefully.
- The Panel was informed that the Business Intelligence Team had analysed the consultation responses and were independent of the library service.

The Chairman summarised the key points raised with regard to the public consultation process.

Commercial Arrangements

The following main points were made:

- The Strategic Director (C&C) confirmed that the freehold for the current library site would be retained by the Council, with the same applying to RBC. The proposed move involved a 125-year leasehold exchange arrangement between the Council and RBC.
- The Assistant Director (T&C) advised that the current library site had not been valued, but a fair market value for both sites would be comparable, in the region of £4.5m.
- In response to a question about whether there would be the potential for the loss of a capital asset, it was clarified that this would not be the case as the Council retained the freehold. As library provision was a statutory function, a library space would always be needed, and if this situation ever changed, there would still be the marketable value to re-let the space.
- The Panel was informed by the Assistant Director (T&C) that the utility costs payable by the Council for the Town Hall would be apportioned from the metered costs of the utilities. It was highlighted that the sustainability improvements to the Town Hall site, such as solar panels and heat pumps, would have some financial benefits for the Council, though these had yet to be quantified.
- It was confirmed that the Council was holding off from carrying out works to the outside of the current library building until the outcome of this potential move had been determined.
- In response to questions about the potential financial risk to the Council, the Deputy Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the Council would be no worse off financially from this move and that the Chief Financial Officer at RBC had the responsibility to protect RBC's interests.
- The Chairman sought clarification on the asset value of the footprint of the current library site, compared to the value of the footprint with the current building located on it. The Strategic Director (C&C) highlighted that the Council would have the use of a new location so would have the same utility for 125 years. It was confirmed that the freehold that was retained related to the land.
- The Chief Executive added further clarification. He indicated that from the RBC plans there was the potential for other buildings to be developed on the site. If this was the case, the Council would inherit what was on the land at the end of the lease period, and whatever value was attributed to the land in terms of uplift would come back to the freeholder. In the meantime, as a result of the leasehold agreement, the Council would benefit from usage of another newer building on a comparable site.
- It was clarified that the Council would not place any restrictions on the leasehold arrangement to protect the footprint of the library site, as any development would be subject to the usual planning restrictions.

- The Council would ensure it obtained a comparable site and service offer and that its costs would be no worse off as a consequence. As an additional benefit the Council would gain the use of a newer, more environmentally sustainable building.
- Further due diligence was to be carried out on the commercial arrangements.

The Chairman summarised the key points and the Panel requested that more details about the lease and the leasehold arrangement should be included in future reports.

Operational Services

The following main points were noted:

- The experience gained from previous library moves in the county was discussed. It was reported that the Bromsgrove library relocation, which had been well received by the community had shown a 38% increase in footfall. Whilst the Hive was integrated with the University of Worcester, its increased footfall level had now settled at 100% higher than that of the previous library.
- The benefits of being part of a mixed site were highlighted with a flow of users accessing the site and benefitting from the convenience of other partner organisations being located in the same vicinity.
- It was explained that it had not been necessary to formally consult with staff, as there would be no material change to their jobs as the relocation was near to the current location. The Assistant Director of Communities commented that staff were very passionate about the library service and had fed in their views regarding operational requirements.
- In terms of stakeholders, the current tenant the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had been formally consulted and should the proposed relocation take place, would move to the new site and continue as the Council's tenant.
- The Panel was advised that backroom accommodation at the new site would be shared with other users.
- It was confirmed that there would be good access to the Town Hall site for deliveries and collections.
- In the broader sense of accessibility, the Panel was informed of various initiatives which would help make the proposed site readily accessible to all users.
- Whilst the Town Hall building would be branded as a Community Hub, it was confirmed that the signage outside would still include 'library'.
- The Assistant Director for Communities assured the Panel that there would be no impact on the roll-out of the libraries unlocked if the library re-located.

The Chairman again summarised the key points raised by the Panel under this heading. She also requested that the viability of a sensory room in the proposed new library be included in the OSPB report.

Collaborative Opportunities

A few issues were raised by Members and responded to as follows:

- It was highlighted that the Council was looking to work collaboratively with the Innovation Centre which was part of the wider Redditch Town Development.
- The potential opportunities for collaboration with Redditch College was raised. Possible initiatives would be considered which could include skills events, careers advice, study space and a youth hub.
- In terms of the multi-functional space, it was envisaged that this could be used for a wide range of possible events going forward. It was recognised that the Manager of the library was very proactive in developing services and was praised for her positive work in setting up new initiatives.

The Chairman, in summing up, highlighted that the consideration of the library move was far more than just financial issues; there was a whole range of community elements that needed to be considered and of which the Panel would wish the Cabinet to be aware.

The Panel recommended that the updated floorplans were available for the OSPB meeting on 26 June so that the Board could obtain clarification on:

- i. The overall useable space
- ii. The specific layout for the Children's and Young Persons areas
- iii. The size and flexibility of the multi-functional space

The CMR indicated that the plans should be available for OSPB.

415 Libraries Unlocked

The Panel received a report which provided an update on developments relating to Libraries Unlocked (LU). The Head of Libraries, Archives and Archaeology (LAA) set out the background to the initial implementation of the open library service delivery model in June 2022 and the feedback received regarding the experience of the 'early adopters' Droitwich and Stourport libraries. Both libraries had seen their opening hours increased by 85% and a significant reduction in core staffing hours. There had been a strong take-up for LU membership from their active library members and their visits during LU opening hours had represented 8% of the total visits and 11% of library issues for the two 2 libraries.

The Head of LAA reported that the two libraries had received a positive response from community partners who had been encouraged to use the libraries in LU times by the offer of free room hire. A survey of LU customers had identified a few areas for improvement which the service had since responded to. The Panel was informed of the libraries that were included in Phase 2 of LU and the criteria which guided that selection. The Panel was informed that the capital investment required for this phase was an estimated £423k, with £220k efficiencies to be delivered.

Members were invited to ask questions and the following points were raised:

- In terms of numbers of library users, compared to pre-covid, the Panel was advised that numbers had been monitored since the pandemic low and there had been a marginal increase in recovery rates since LU was introduced.
- It was confirmed that where libraries were located within listed buildings, this would be taken into account in the feasibility work carried out by the team assessing the location for the introduction of LU.
- With regard to public consultation, the Assistant Director for Communities explained that there hadn't been the need for formal public consultation for LU, as the concept and delivery of offering a different way of delivering library services had been previously included in the approval of the library strategy. With every library change, however, there was engagement work taking place to support the transition process with customers and the community focussing on the use of facilities and wider use by local groups.
- As the roll-out of LU took place, local Members would be kept informed of the plans for libraries in their area and the engagement process taking place with the local community.
- In terms of implementation of Phase 2 LU, the Head of LAA advised that Stage 1 was expected to go live in Autumn 2023 and Stage 2 approximately 3 to 6 months later.
- The Panel was advised that as part of the libraries role, there was always an element of dealing with occasional disruptive incidents within libraries. With there being no staff on site with LU, relations with local police Community Support Officers had been strengthened to mitigate any concerns that users had.
- The LU proposals would see staffing numbers reduced in the libraries involved. A staff consultation exercise had commenced yesterday. It was highlighted that with a current vacancy rate of 10.2 FTE posts, this would help to mitigate the need for staff redundancies. In response a further question, the Assistant Director for Communities advised that every vacancy would be held for this purpose and they would work to minimise redundancies wherever possible.
- In terms of timescales for the investment and efficiencies figures referred to, the Assistant Director explained that the £423k was a one-off capital investment. The £220k saving was 'in perpetuity' and had been signed off as part of the Council's medium term financial plan therefore removed from the libraries budget from this year. It was explained that this would take some time to roll-out and therefore had been part of the consideration of where LU should be introduced, depending on the likely return on investment, to ensure that best value was obtained.
- A Member referred to a library where there were resident concerns regarding anti-social behaviour in the vicinity. It was confirmed the team were aware of this situation which was partly why it had been included in Stage 2.
- With regard to the safeguarding of users, the Panel was assured that the LU had been proven to be a safe model. The Head of LAA

explained that there was currently full internal coverage of CCTV and in the second phase this would be extended to the outside of the library as well. There were a number of health and safety measures which had been put in place to address any potential issues. These included a mandatory in person induction; a dedicated 24-hour landline linking direct to the Police, and also to Property Services for any building related issues and a security and fire alarm linked to suppliers for a timely response. An agreement was also shortly to be implemented whereby the buildings would be monitored by the Council's Facilities Management team between 5-8pm during the week and all-day Saturday.

- Partners and co-located services were actively encouraged to make use the facilities of the library in LU hours.
- It was confirmed that children under 16 years were currently not allowed to make use of LU. The Head of LAA advised that staff were engaging with local schools to gauge library use of this age group to try and ensure that hours were staffed at the times when there was demand. Consideration was being given as to whether children in Year 11 should be allowed access to LU.
- It was highlighted that staff were the most valuable asset of the library service and the plan was to ensure that there was some staff availability most days within a local area.
- With regards to libraries which were not suited to LU, the Panel was advised that the balance of staffed hours would need to be looked at. Local members would be informed of any implications arising from this.

The Panel requested a review of the progress of Libraries Unlocked, to include financial information. It was agreed that this would be provided in early 2024. In the meantime, members would be kept apprised of updates regarding their local libraries.

416 Work Programme

The Panel reviewed it Work Programme and it was agreed that 'Farming and Rural Estates' would be added as a future item.

The meeting ended at 12.45 pm

Chairman