

Report to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

25th February 2021

Subject:	Update on Libraries and Archives Service
Director:	Director Housing and Communities, Alan Caddick
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 To update the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board on future service provision for the Libraries and Archives Service – against the impact of COVID-19 on current/future operational delivery.

2 Background

- 2.1 Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Transforming Local Services (TLS) programme was working towards an agreed new service model proposal – with the intention of operating a first pilot project in Rowley – from Blackheath Library. This new community hub was scheduled to open from May 2020 – operating a cross directorate approach with teams available to support residents from Adult Social Care, Children’s Services, Public Health and Neighbourhoods (Libraries/Local Service).
- 2.2 The Transforming Local Services and Workplace Vision programmes aligned corporately with other strategies and policies – including the



corporate plan, asset/commercial strategies and Smart Working guidance. At the heart of this innovative programme are core principles – in support of Vision 2030 – that include:

- Improving customer service and satisfaction
- Making better use of built assets
- Improving visitor numbers to community spaces
- Co-ordinated, holistic service and linking with the Voluntary Sector
- Aligning key strategies to ensure services transformation.

2.3 Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Library and Local Service ceased activity in line with national lock down requirements and the opening of the pilot programme at Blackheath Library was stalled. Set against the backdrop of these challenging times – the Council is still responding and operating its services within COVID-19 mitigation measures – and it has become clear that the delivery model being piloted at Blackheath Library should be progressed to realise the benefit to residents in each town. Therefore, work re-started on the completion of the refurbishment programme from October 2020 – towards a potential launch/re-opening during 2021.

2.4 During the COVID-19 pandemic customers have been unable to access face to face services – and subsequently, the provision of digital and telephone services has seen a marked increase in usage. Customer behaviours have been nudged into utilising these transactional methods and the feedback has been positive. Services and employees have adapted quickly and efficiently in identifying and implementing the delivery of services using digital and telephone across front-line delivery.

2.5 It has become clear that there is a need to accelerate the provision of digital services across key areas – however, there will still be a requirement – post COVID-19 – for face to face customer contact and this is at the heart of delivering library services going forward.

3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan? (select relevant category and inc narrative how deliver)



	<p>Best start in life for children and young people <i>Offering enhanced facilities for families, children and young people to access learning/IT resources and benefit from health/mental wellbeing opportunities/engagement within an inclusive environment. Access to books – from a young age – increases life chances</i></p>
	<p>People live well and age well <i>Libraries offer spaces where people can meet and connect safely – thereby reducing loneliness and isolation and improving mental health/wellbeing</i></p>
	<p>Strong resilient communities <i>Libraries are the original community hubs supporting the needs of local people</i></p>
	<p>Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods</p>
	<p>A strong and inclusive economy <i>Libraries support residents to access job support, benefits and help with small business start-up – by enhancing these services – through the development of ‘community hubs’ – more residents will be encouraged to use library services that might not have previously visited/or taken-up membership of a Library</i></p>
	<p>A connected and accessible Sandwell</p>

4 Context and Key Issues

4.1 The Current Position

4.1.1 Libraries and Archives closed completely on 23rd March 2020. Following agreement at the Reset and Recovery Board on 3rd September, Central Library began offering limited services on a non-contact basis (order and collect for books by appointment only and essential computer use by appointment). Later in 2020, Wednesbury Library began offering the same services with reduced hours – followed by Smethwick Library and Glebefields Library in Tipton. Library staff are working a percentage of their hours on a rota basis. In addition, the Home Library Service is operating and delivering books to vulnerable residents.

4.1.2 The recent restrictions have meant that no further libraries can begin delivering services – although libraries nationally are recognised as essential, statutory services and current government guidance allows for



the delivery of limited services (as detailed above). It is planned to restart services in a gradual manner once restrictions allow.

4.1.3 While libraries were closed completely (during the first lockdown period), there was a significant increase in the number of e-books available/being downloaded – and this was reflected in new Library memberships. In addition, more residents engaged with/logged-on to social media pages – as events and activities were delivered remotely. This is not viewed as a replacement for a full ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service – particularly as many residents in Sandwell are digitally excluded and/or unable to travel to the limited libraries offering services – but it does align to the increase in digital activity across other front-line delivery services within the Council and a change in digital awareness.

4.2 Re-focus – Post COVID-19

4.2.1 Once restrictions are lifted it is planned for a phased return of the outlying 13 libraries followed by a review of provision e.g. opening hours/potential to share spaces and deliver community hubs. The restarting of the Mobile Library – including supporting smaller libraries that may not be back to full opening – is also planned.

4.2.2 There will also be a renewed focus on the delivery of the TLS programme (aligned to the corporate plan and other Council strategies/policies) – which will involve several main town libraries over a period of time (i.e. Central, Oldbury, Blackheath, Smethwick, Glebefields, and Wednesbury).

4.2.3 In response to proposals being explored within the Town Investment Plans – a Towns Fund bid has been submitted (aligned to wider regeneration plans for West Bromwich) to create a cultural/Town Hall quarter through the merger of Central Library and the Town Hall – creating a ‘cultural/community hub’, incorporating the shared service delivery principles of the TLS programme and including the potential for a renewed cultural/engagement focus within this area of the town.



4.2.4 In addition, a review is being undertaken of the Archives Service. A Feasibility Study (funded by The National Archives) has recently been commissioned to explore potential options for a new centre.

4.3 Blackheath Library

As the first pilot, Blackheath Library will reopen during 2021 (in-line with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions) as a community hub – offering a wider range of Council services (including library services) and in partnership with the Voluntary Sector. Blackheath Library has been undergoing a refurbishment programme in preparation for bringing these services together from October 2020. These are now complete and colleagues from NHS Sandwell School Nurses service will be moving in once restrictions are lifted – alongside colleagues from Housing services. A confirmed re-opening date is not fixed due to current restrictions – although it is hoped to deliver limited library services from there as soon as permitted.

4.4 Oldbury Library

4.4.1 In-line with the TLS programme – there are plans to relocate Oldbury Library from Jack Judge House to Oldbury Council House – as part of the One Stop Shop. This will enable residents to access more services under one roof – whilst ensuring that Jack Judge House is able to provide more accommodation to other essential key services looking for a location in Oldbury.

4.4.2 Library management has been working closely with colleagues in property services and contractors to create a design that works for the space. Consultation with staff teams and union colleagues – including sharing a plan with a video of a virtual walk-through – is ongoing.

4.5 Future Provision

Future library provision will be reviewed post COVID-19 to ensure that the best possible service within potential budget constraints can be



delivered for the residents of Sandwell – and aligned to the TLS/Workplace Vision programmes. Any potential changes will be subject to full consultation with all stakeholders.

5 Alternative Options

5.1 N/A

6 Implications

Resources:	Financial, staffing, land/building implications <i>These will be considered as part of the TLS/Workplace Vision programmes</i>
Legal and Governance:	Legal implications including regulations/law under which proposals are required/permitted and constitutional provisions <i>These will be considered as part of the TLS/Workplace Vision programmes and aligned to the Council's Asset Strategy</i>
Risk:	Risk implications, including any mitigating measures planned/taken, health and safety, insurance implications <i>These have all been considered as part of the TLS programme and project delivery. Any mitigation measures – in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – have been considered within Risk Assessments and in consultation with Public Health/Health & Safety and the Unions. All subject to approvals at the Reset and Recovery Board processes and aligned to current Government guidelines</i>
Equality:	Implications for equality (all aspects and characteristics) including how meeting Equality Duty, equality impact assessments <i>An Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken as part of the project planning for the Blackheath Library pilot scheme. All proposals will be subject to equality impact assessments and incorporated within the programmes</i>
Health and Wellbeing:	Implications of the proposals on health and wellbeing of our communities <i>These are positive implications and will benefit residents throughout the Borough</i>
Social Value	Implications for social value and how the proposals are meeting this (for e.g. employment of local traders, young people)



	<i>As above – these are positive implications and will benefit residents throughout the Borough – delivering enhanced opportunities for access to learning/health and mental/ wellbeing provision</i>
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7. Appendices

N/A

8. Background Papers

Presentation Slides

