

Questions about the Future of the Library Service for the County Council to consider on 16th February.

This meeting will consider whether to cut the budget to Somerset Library Service by 25%. Clearly this is a major cut to the Service and will have a fundamental effect on the way that Public Library Services are delivered across Somerset. Before Council members vote on this decision, we wish to ensure that Councillors are aware of the impact of the proposed cuts on the future of the Service.

In 2009-10 over 2.8 million visits were made to public libraries in Somerset. Customers borrowed over 3.3 million items and spent over 230,000 hours using library computers. Library staff answered over 390,000 public enquiries. It is a busy, thriving Service which is highly valued by its customers, as evidenced by the phenomenal response to the recent public consultation.

The Cabinet voted to agree the new Vision and Strategy for the Library Service on 2 February. In light of this decision, we believe that it is contradictory to ask Councillors to cut 25% from the Library Service budget. Such a severe reduction undermines the Vision and Strategy. We ask you to reconsider the level of the cuts demanded from the Service and to reduce these to a more reasonable level, which would ensure the future sustainability of the Service for Somerset's residents.

Our particular concerns include the following:

- The service has been unable to support its core product – books – in recent years due to the reduction in the resources budget from £800,000 in 2008-09 to £380,000 in 2010-11 (these figures are CIPFA actuals). Such a major reduction in a key budget area is not sustainable and the resources fund urgently needs to be rebalanced
- Most budget headings, from guiding and signage through to staffing budgets, have been reduced in the last 4 years resulting in a reduction of over 20%. The Service is now being asked to take on a further 25% budget reduction
- Having made savings within the library service over a year or more, due to the current recruitment freeze, we have seen these savings transferred to cover funding shortfalls outside the service
- Libraries in Somerset are no longer led by a library professional. The County Librarian used to report directly to the Chief Executive of the County Council. Successive reorganisations have had a negative impact on the standing of senior library management, which will be reduced to one post from 1 April 2011. This is compounded by placing libraries within a broader service grouping, that includes a focus on adult social care.

A major concern is income generation:

- The current proposals task Library staff and customers with the target of generating an additional £155,000 over the next 3 years, the bulk of which is set to be generated within the next 12 months. Somerset Libraries already generate more income per 1,000 population than any other English County and we are concerned that the new targets underpinning

the budget proposals are unrealistic and unachievable. Failure to achieve the income targets could result in Councillors being forced to consider further library closures in the 2012-13 budget round to rebalance the budget next year

- There is particular concern for the proposal to charge £5 to replace a lost library card. This would be the highest charge of any authority in England and Wales. (The next highest fee in 2009-10 was £3-50 and the average fee is far lower.) We believe that a £5 fee would act as a catalyst to decrease library membership, particularly amongst the library service's most vulnerable members – young families and the elderly. Can it be even ethical to apply a £5 charge for a lost library card when these cards cost only 10p to purchase?
- People whose library does not face an immediate threat will be less prepared to make a significant donation to support others, thereby creating inequities in burden of income generation

We also have some more general points to make:

It has been noted nationally that there are far too many library authorities and that library provision should be more efficiently delivered by joining services together. Somerset libraries have led the way in collaborative working and have achieved significant savings over the past 13 years as part of the LibrariesWest Consortium. The Service received a National award in 2011 (from BIC – Book Industry Communications) in recognition of its “back office” efficiencies. Plans to run libraries with voluntary groups will create many individual ‘library authorities’ with different visions and strategies for maintaining a library service. These are likely to be less efficient, and deliver a narrower service than the current joint arrangements and could increase ‘back office’ costs.

Ironically the recent ‘furore’ surrounding libraries has been prompted by politicians’ plans to reduce public library provision across the country, and now everybody is talking about libraries. This is providing the County Council with an exciting opportunity to use this conversation to deliver the best possible service.

We ask you to reconsider the level of the cuts demanded from the Service and to reduce these to a more reasonable, sustainable level, which would ensure that Somerset’s residents could enjoy the ‘integrated, relevant and customer-focused’ library service identified in the Vision and Strategy.