

REPORT TO COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

CEC LIBRARIES STRATEGY CONSULTATION



Report Reference	COM-24-09
Meeting Date	30 th September 2024
Agenda Item	6
Prepared by	Town Clerk

1.0 BACKGROUND

Cheshire East Council launched a consultation on its new Libraries Strategy at the beginning of August with a closing date of 15th September.

The strategy introduces three tiers of library:

- Teir 1 – Library Hubs
- Teir 2 – Local Libraires
- Tier 3 – Community Libraries

The classifications were based on a range of metrics including usage, membership and local demography. Knutsford will become a Tier 2 library where it would retain its current range of service but hours will be reduced.

In September, a number of members attended a virtual briefing with Cheshire East Council which provided more information on the changes. It was reported that it is likely that a further ½ day of library operations will be removed from Knutsford library and that certain services (i.e. blue badges) will require an appointment to enable more efficient staffing. Information was also provided on the potential for staff-less sessions whereby access will be provided through a key-card system (similar to a gym).

Since the closing date of the consultation was before the committee's next meeting, a draft response was prepared by the Town Clerk and circulated to all members for review prior to submission before the closing date.

2.0 VOLUNTEER LED SESSIONS

The council's response to the consultation restated the committee's previously resolved position that it was not minded to provide financial support to Cheshire East Council to fund staffing library sessions. Cheshire East Council had provided a cost of £19k per year to retain a half day opening session.

Previous discussions with CEC had also suggested that the town council could support library operations by coordinating volunteer-led sessions. Volunteer-led sessions would involve coordinating a rota of volunteers who would deliver a limited range of services to users (e.g. assistance with issuing/returning books, but not services like blue-badge renewals). This would likely be a set session, for example that a Monday morning was a volunteer-led session each week. The response to the consultation stated the council is open to considering this further; the full detail and practical considerations of this require further investigation and would be subject to a further report and decision by this committee.

3.0 SUBMITTED RESPONSE

Knutsford Town Council supports the stated strategy objectives of enhancing libraries through the introduction of complimentary services and greater promotion of the service. The Town Council considers it should remain an objective that all residents of Cheshire East have easy access to a library through comprehensive provision across the borough's towns.

The Town Council does not object to the concept of community managed libraries

The Town Council does not disagree with the scoring mechanism employed to determine the tier system and understands why Knutsford is placed in Tier 2. The Town Council supports the concept that Tier 2 libraries deliver core library services alongside a customer service offer.

With specific regard to Knutsford library and potential changes to opening hours, the Town Council considers it preferable to retain the half day provision rather than introduce a day where the library is closed. However, the Town Council does not support further reductions to library opening hours beyond those introduced following the last consultation.

With regard to alternative delivery models, the Town Council would not support outsourcing to external providers nor public-private partnerships which introduces a profit motive into the delivery of core services and reduces local accountability. The Town Council is uncertain how a staff mutual, the establishment of a charity or transferring to a social enterprise would radically deliver the savings the borough council is required to make and, in particular for charities, would increase competition for funding amongst other local charities; however, a charity could be part of delivering a community managed library.

The Town Council supports the exploration of unstaffed extensions to library hours through the use of technology but this should not be used to warrant further reductions in staffed hours. It should instead expand opening hours, particularly at times when users who would not require support would be more likely to visit. It would need to have appropriate safeguarding measures in place to ensure the council's asset was not put at risk (i.e. through vandalism).

The Town Council is not presently minded to fund staffing of the library to prevent reductions in hours. However, it is open to exploring the development of a Town Council led scheme to introduce volunteer led sessions where this can safeguard and expand the service and ensure visitors have the support they need when visiting the library.

4.0 DECISION REQUIRED

The committee should ratify the consultation response.