

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 3.00 pm on Thursday, 20 April 2023

Present:

Members: Councillor J Innes (Chair)
 Councillor P Akhtar
 Councillor J Blundell
 Councillor S Keough
 Councillor R Thay
 Councillor CE Thomas
 Councillor A Tucker

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson

Employees (by
Directorate):

Law and Governance G Holmes, U Patel, T Robinson

Service, Libraries and P Barnett (Head of Service Libraries and Migration)
Migration

By Invitation: Community Managed Libraries
 S Vickery, J Rudbridge, L Winter, A Fox

 Summer Reading Team
 D Lloyd, C Robinson, A Brown

Apologies: Councillors A Masih and K Sandhu (Cabinet Member for
 Education and Skills), Mr G Vohra (Co-opted Member)

Public Business

31. Declarations of Interests

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

32. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 March 2023 were agreed and signed as a true record.

Matters Arising

Further to Minute 21 and 26, the Board noted that a response had not yet been received from the Secretary of State with regard to the financial position schools are in. This would be followed up.

33. **Community Managed Libraries in Coventry**

The Board considered a Briefing Note of the Head of Service, Libraries and Migration which provided some brief background information and an update on the development of community managed libraries in the city.

The briefing note highlighted how the City Council introduced the Connecting Communities programme in 2015/16 and this included a range of changes to Library Services along with changes to various other Council services based in localities. One of the key aspects of the libraries' elements of the Connecting Communities programme was the clear intention of the Council to try wherever possible to avoid libraries closing permanently to local communities. The creation of three community managed libraries was a key part of the successful delivery of this intention.

As the Council worked on the implementation of the Connecting Communities programme officers reviewed the pattern of approaches taken by other local authorities who had also attempted similar exercises in protecting much valued community assets whilst reducing budgets in response to wider financial challenges. It became clear that the key issue in successfully delivering community managed libraries was the strength of the organisations and the maintenance of some support to these organisations post library transfer.

During the course of 2018/19 the Council successfully managed the transfer of management of the following three former Council libraries:

- Cheylesmore Library – transferred to Cheylesmore Community Centre
- Earlsdon Library – transferred to Earlsdon Carnegie Community Library (ECCL)
- Finham Library – transferred to Finham Library Action Group (FLAG)

The transfers were delivered in a managed way with considerable dialogue between the Council and the new community organisations. Many different Council services were involved and each library transfer followed a slightly different path, but the Library Service developed and maintained very close liaison with the new partners.

Whilst each of the three community managed libraries have developed in interesting and innovative ways, the Council has worked in partnership to ensure that each library continues to offer:

- Free Internet / PC access to Coventry residents through open access PCs (and ebooks / e-audiobooks) provided by the Council (and supported by CCC ICT), plus online resources.
- A limited range of both children and adults Library Service book stock to any local resident who is a member of the Library Service, and access the wider stock via reservations etc. Often this stock is supplemented by the different partners own stock.
- Provision for printing / scanning etc at reasonable cost to local residents.

Representatives of each of the libraries were present at the meeting and shared their experiences with the Board including the successes and challenges faced in providing these much-valued community resources. Key things the Board were made aware of were:

- **Cheylesmore Library**

Cheylesmore library is now fully integrated into the Cheylesmore Community Centre, with a distinct group of volunteers who work with the Centre to ensure that Cheylesmore residents continue to have access to library services. The Council provided a transition grant to support building work to facilitate better access to the library and create more flexibility in the use of bookable space in the Centre. The Centre building is held on a lease by the Community Association from the Council.

- **Earlsdon Library**

The grant provided to support the transition of Earlsdon library has resulted in an impressive re-configuration of a large section of the space to create a multi-use area facilitating events and other related activities. The library has a large cohort of volunteers which has needed to be constantly refreshed and has good connections into the Earlsdon community. The library is currently held on a short term lease by ECCL from the Council.

- **Finham Library**

The development of Finham Library has been positively supported by the local community in the Finham area with FLAG choosing to use the transition grant to create a Community Library and Café on the Green. The range of events and activities taking place at the venue are focused on the demographics of the Finham community. The library building is held by FLAG on a lease from the Council.

The Library Service continue to provide mainly remote support to the three partners. Visits were currently arranged on roughly a quarterly basis to refresh the book stock and discuss any local issues. Each library has a 'buddy' library who are able to respond to calls and enquiries, particularly regarding the computer systems used to lend Council books. The recent change in the Library Management System resulted in all volunteers having training cascaded through. The Council still provide support (particularly to Earlsdon and Finham Libraries) through Property Services, although the community organisations have taken on aspects of the running costs over the time since transfer.

Representatives of each library further elucidated to other challenges they had faced, especially with regards to initial difficulties when first setting up as a community managed library, current workload demands, energy costs, and most importantly, the remaining years on the leases of each library.

The Members asked questions and received responses on a number of matters including:

- The improvements community managed libraries have made to the local community and any potential ways the Board could help in the future.
- The security of the libraries' leases and the potential to secure them for the future.
- Ongoing IT support and higher-level systems support for libraries and library volunteers with 6-month refreshers.
- Community asset transfer and related matters.
- The Summer Reading Scheme (also connected to Minute 34 below) and how it is being taken up by community managed libraries.

- Succession planning for attracting and retaining trustees.
- Training for library volunteers, organisers and trustees.
- Comparative library services and provision with regards to council-run libraries.
- Collaboration between community managed libraries in Coventry.
- The potential availability of Carnegie Trust funds with regards to Earlsdon Library's partnership with the organisation.
- Recognising and using Earlsdon, Finham, and Cheylesmore community managed libraries as a template and a resource for the creation of any future community managed libraries.

The Board recognised, commended and thanked the organisers and volunteers of each community managed library for attending the meeting, sharing their successes and challenges, and for their continued work in their communities.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1. Notes the report.**
- 2. Recommends that the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills considers a standardised long lease to those community libraries that have a recognised charitable status.**
- 3. Recommends that the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills supports the proposed asset transfer for Earlsdon Library.**
- 4. Recognises and acknowledges the value of the support given to Community Libraries by the Library Service.**

34. Delivery of the Summer Reading Challenge in Coventry

The Board considered a briefing note of the Head of Service, Libraries and Migration which provided an update on the Summer Reading Challenge (SRC) and some information regarding this year's activities.

The Reading Agency is a national charity whose main purpose is to support the promotion of reading as an activity to promote good health and wellbeing, and support people to tackle life's big challenges. For many years the Reading Agency's flagship project for children has been the SRC.

SRC is delivered in partnership with public libraries, with the very vast majority of library services taking part to some extent. The programme is intended to act as a bridge for reading and learning across the main school holidays. The idea is that for children who maintain active reading over the holiday, their minds will remain active, they will be updating or improving their reading skills and will arrive better prepared for the new school year in September.

Each year there would be a distinctive theme to the SRC designed by the Reading Agency, and this year the theme is "Ready, Set, Read!". The Reading Agency has teamed up with the Youth Sport Trust to design a challenge which "aims to keep children's minds and bodies active over the summer break, empowering young

people to forge new connections with others and unleash the power of play, sport and physical activity through learning.”

Children will be encouraged to make regular visits to their local library, register for the SRC, read 6 books from the carefully selected booklist and perform a series of activities to earn rewards (stickers, activity cards etc) eventually becoming a ‘completer’ and being rewarded with a medal. The objective is to “keep imaginations moving across the school holidays” and by participating children will have the opportunity to try new and exciting books, develop some new skills and hopefully find new interests which they can continue after completion of the SRC.

Coventry were successful in receiving some additional resources from the Reading Agency to facilitate a pilot project with a small number of chosen Coventry schools. Working with the Schools Improvement and Literary Co-ordinators the Library Service approached 7 local schools and an officer was assigned to each to build a relationship with the school, either focusing on year 3 or year 1. The children all were offered a ‘pilot scheme pack’ and the aim was that we would visit the children in class a few times during June/July and that they visit their local library in the run up to the SRC.

Library managers found that they had to adapt their plans to fit the needs and capacity of the school staff. Some schools were difficult to communicate with, but others were very supportive, and staff noted new children visiting and joining the library and participating in the SRC.

Overall, both in Coventry and elsewhere numbers of children completing the SRC had fallen in recent years. Whilst in the mid-2010s Coventry had over 3,000 children take part with more than half ‘completing’ the challenge, recently numbers had fallen to around 1700 children taking part and around 800 completers. Factors influencing this included:

- Move to community managed libraries with some choosing not to take part.
- Children’s tastes change and the appeal of stickers etc change, more resources are now digital, including registration but there is a disconnect.
- In previous years we had Young People acting as volunteers which due to pressure on staff time has not been continued.
- Covid continued to be a factor last year.
- Lifestyle factors and changing patterns of geographical movement of families during the summer holidays.

In addition to the ‘core package’ of stickers / bookmarks etc, this year Coventry Libraries would include prizes of children’s footballs, rugby balls, perforated balls (for indoor use), throwing rings, hula hoops etc to build on the theme of getting active and continuing to participate in sports and physical activity.

Officers from the Summer Reading Team attended the meeting to share their views and experience of the scheme. They spoke of having to constantly revamp/refresh the scheme and to ensure continued engagement, the team have reduced the number of visits required for children to make and also worked in collaboration with a number of schools and authors to make the scheme more engaging.

The Members asked questions and received responses on a number of matters including:

- Contrasting reading schemes to those of community managed libraries and the possibility of carrying out reading schemes with a local focus rather than a national focus.
- Difficulties in communication with specific schools in Coventry and the factors involved as to how responsive each individual school was to the SRC.
- Approaching other outside organisations like supermarkets or sports teams to make the programme more attractive and to encourage more families to take part.

RESOLVED that the Board notes the briefing note.

35. **Autism in Schools Task and Finish Group - Interim Report**

The Board considered a Briefing Note of the Scrutiny Coordinator which provided an interim progress report on the work undertaken so far by the Task and Finish Group which was to consider issues around the support for children and young people and their families, who are waiting for an autism assessment, or have been diagnosed with autism in school settings.

The task and finish group were briefed in detail on the support to children, families and schools provided through the Council's Education Services; SEND Information and Advice Service, the Education Psychology service and the Complex Communication Team.

Members of the Task and Finish Group also visited three schools to gain first hand experience of the support offered to children with additional needs. One was a special school specifically for autistic children, one had a specialist unit within a mainstream primary school and the third was a mainstream primary school exemplifying best inclusive practice.

Members were able to talk to staff and pupils at the school and to observe the settings in practice.

As a consequence of these visits, Members requested an extension of the task and finish group to allow them to engage with parents/carers, children, and young people, as well as visit a wider range of school settings. To enable this to happen effectively and sensitively requires the work of the task and finish group to extend beyond this municipal year.

There were several themes and areas for further exploration that had been identified through the work of the task and finish group:

- The need for clearer referral pathways for parents
- Support for all schools to deliver best practice across the city
- Provision in Secondary schools and strong transition from Primary
- The views of parents and carers and children and young people

It was hoped that these issues could be considered in more detail through work in 2023-24. In order to facilitate that, the Task and Finish Group sought support from the Board to continue their work into the New Municipal Year.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1. Notes the report.**
- 2. Supports the continuation of the Task and Finish Group during the 2023/24 Municipal Year.**
- 3. Requests that a letter be sent to Councillor Clifford thanking him for his valuable contribution to the work of the Task and Finish Group and to wish him a long and happy retirement.**

37. Work Programme

The Board noted the work programme and agreed the inclusion of the items below on the 2023/24 work programme.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board (2) notes the Work Programme with the inclusion of Colleges and Post 16 provision to an early meeting in 2023-24.

38. Any Other Business

John Gregg, Director of Children's Services

The Board noted that John was leaving to take up a new role at a different authority and wanted to record their thanks and appreciation for the work carried out by John and wished him every success in his new role.

(Meeting closed at 4.40 pm)