Somerset County Council

Proposed changes to
Somerset Library Services

Public Consultation Proposals
November 2014
Introduction

The purpose of this consultation is to understand your views on a series of proposals to change the way Library Services will operate in future in Somerset.

The proposals will see no library buildings close but will make savings of almost £500,000 in the year from April 2015 to March 2016, helping to protect the most vulnerable in Somerset and reflecting the Council’s financial pressures. The proposals have been developed in order to:

- Ensure that Somerset Library Services are able to respond to changes in customer expectations and demography
- Reflect the public’s strong preference that we do everything we can to keep local library buildings open
- Ensure Somerset has modern Library Services that are comprehensive, efficient and affordable

Somerset County Council would like your views on the proposals. We would also like to hear about any other ideas you may have that we may not have already considered. The feedback from this consultation will be used to create a final set of proposals for decision in early 2015.

You can obtain a copy of the questionnaire by:

- Clicking online at www.somerset.gov.uk/libraryconsultation
- Picking up a copy in your local library/mobile library
- Emailing libraryservicesreview@somerset.gov.uk if you require the questionnaire in a different language or format

You can return your completed questionnaire by:

- Completing it electronically online
- Dropping it off at any Somerset library or mobile library
- Posting it to any Somerset Library

The consultation closes on Sunday 11 January at midnight. If you have any questions or want to understand more about the proposals either:

- Email libraryservicesreview@somerset.gov.uk
- Attend a drop-in session to be held in each District - details on www.somerset.gov.uk/libraryconsultation
- Attend one of the sessions held in each library - details on www.somerset.gov.uk/libraryconsultation
- Speak to a Library Services member of staff
- Phone 0845 345 9177
Proposal 1: Enable and inspire all to take advantage of the digital age

Summary

This proposal aims to build on Somerset libraries’ digital services. The library service currently provides access to computers and supports people to get online. To improve this we propose to widen access by removing charges for the use of all library computers and install free wireless internet access (Wi-Fi) in all libraries. This will be an investment in the service of around £20,000 per year. Furthermore, we want to continue to improve online services, work in partnership with other organisations to help people develop more of the digital skills they need, and to encourage people to make the most of the possibilities of the digital world.

Background

Somerset Library Services already offer many digital services and supports those who can’t access the internet (i.e. the digitally excluded) through:

- A network of 241 recently upgraded computers in libraries. Use of these computers is currently charged for and this has contributed to a decrease in the number of people using them.
- Wireless internet access (Wi-Fi) already installed in 5 libraries (Bridgwater, Frome, Minehead, Taunton and Yeovil), allowing customers to use their own mobile devices for free. More and more people have mobile devices such as smart-phones, tablet computers and laptops.
- A website (www.librarieswest.org.uk) which enables members to renew and reserve their library loans online, update their personal details and browse a shared catalogue of almost 2 million items. Customers can also access an e-audio and an e-book service.
- Free and comprehensive online reference information available in the library and from home computers, such as Ancestry Online, COBRA (business information) and Access to Research (academic articles).
- 13 libraries run UKOnline courses to help people develop their digital skills so that they can benefit from the online world, and all front-line library staff are being trained to help people build their digital skills.
- 12 libraries have self-service technology enabling members to make payments, borrow, return, and renew their books and other items.

What changes are proposed?

- Removing charges for using library computers
- Installing free Wi-Fi in all libraries:
  - Initially in a further 21 libraries at a one-off cost of around £45,000
  - In the remaining 8 libraries (Bishops Lydeard, Dulverton, Highbridge, Milborne Port, Nether Stowey, Shepton Mallet, Somerton, Sunningdale) as soon as possible after that, subject to identifying an affordable network connection to these 8 libraries.
• Continuing to develop a libraries app (for mobile phones) and further improve the library service website
• Working with partners to provide more support for those who are currently digitally excluded
• Working with partners to explore ways in which libraries can do more to inspire people to make the most of the digital world. This may involve:
  o Providing opportunities to use new technologies such as 3D printers in so-called ‘maker spaces’ (enabling current and potential library customers to use technology to develop and share skills)
  o Using libraries to support massive open online courses (‘MOOCs’ – short free online courses, often led by world class academics)
  o Potentially running coding clubs (fun after-school clubs for children where they can learn coding and other skills)

**Why are we proposing this change?**

Public libraries were founded as a way to bring education to those without access to it. Enabling access to the digital world and inspiring people by the possibilities it opens up continues that tradition. Changing technologies, changing customer expectations and the national move to deliver public services digitally means Library Services need to look at how and what we deliver digitally now and in the future.

**What will be the effect of these changes?**

Somerset County Council expects these changes will:

• Widen access to computers and encourage more people to use libraries
• Support the ‘digitally excluded’ through support, training and providing access to the internet
• Continue to meet customer expectations of what modern public Library Services should offer
• Increase e-lending and the number of transactions carried out online
• Help people to experience, experiment with, and be inspired by new technologies
• An investment of £20,000 each year - funding that will therefore not be available to other parts of the library service

**What is the Council looking for feedback on?**

Whilst all views and comments are welcome and will inform any decision, the Council particularly welcomes views on:

• Whether there are other things Library Services should consider doing to enable and inspire everyone to take advantage of the digital age
• Suggestions of other partners Library Services should work with to achieve its ambitions
Proposal 2: Develop and expand our outreach services for those that cannot visit a library

Summary

Somerset County Council currently provides a Home Library Service for those who cannot access a library. Increased annual funding of around £10,000 will enable us to help more vulnerable people receive a personalised service. It would also help ensure we are ready for the expected increase in the elderly population in Somerset.

Background

The Council currently funds a Home Library Service for those who cannot access a library, provided by the Royal Voluntary Service (RVS). The RVS delivers books to housebound individuals. Whilst usage of the Home Library Service has almost doubled over the last 18 months (to 243 service users in April 2014) this is likely to be supporting only a small fraction of those that could benefit from it. The Council also operates a Good Neighbour Scheme to help people borrow books on behalf of someone else by offering free requests and no overdue charges. Awareness of this scheme is very low, though we believe that many informal arrangements exist. The library service also provide books to residents of 51 residential homes (less than 15% of all such homes in Somerset). This service is not always personalised to the needs of residents, for example often a box of books is simply dropped off at the home.

What changes are proposed?

The Home Library Service will be expanded to support more vulnerable people and to provide a more personalised service to more residential homes. Increased promotion of the Good Neighbour Scheme will aim to increase take-up.

Why are we proposing this change?

This will help ensure that the needs of vulnerable people are more effectively supported. Somerset has a high proportion of people aged 65 and over, and this is predicted to grow substantially.

What will be the effect of these changes?

Expanding these services should help more people live independently in their own homes and stay mentally active. For example reading can help prevent the onset of dementia by 35% (New England Journal of Medicine).

What is the Council looking for feedback on?

Whilst all views and comments are welcome and will inform any decision, the Council particularly welcomes views on:

- Whether there are other partners we should explore working with
- How we can raise the profile of the Good Neighbour Scheme
Proposal 3: Implement criteria for mobile library stops and introduce alternatives to the mobile library service

Summary

Introducing criteria for mobile library stops will ensure Somerset County Council only provides the mobile service to those rural communities that need it most (based on distance from a library building and distance from another mobile stop) and those where there is demand (based on the number of users). This proposal would save £60,000 each year.

Affected customers would be helped to access alternative library services (such as the Home Library Service or Good Neighbour Scheme) and the Council proposes to provide £15,000 one-off grant funding to support communities to implement further locally-led alternatives.

Background

Somerset’s Mobile Library Service (mobiles) currently makes 574 stops once a month in 344 communities, including 41 at schools and playgroups and 13 at residential homes or similar institutions. The length of stops varies from 5 minutes to 2.5 hours and around 2,600 people used the mobile library service between April 2013 and March 2014.

The cost of providing the current level of service is approximately £114,000 per year. The cost for every item borrowed is more than twice that of the Council’s smaller libraries. Analysis of records held on the Library Management System shows that 47% of those users registered to a mobile library also used a library building in 2013/14 and that around 400 users account for half of all items borrowed.

What changes are proposed?

The proposed changes are based around need and demand:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need: No mobile library stops within 3 miles (in a straight line) of a library building</td>
<td>This criteria aims to ensure that the mobile service is maintained in communities where it will be most difficult for people to travel to a library building. Around 95% of communities potentially affected by this change are covered by some form of community transport scheme.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need: No mobile stops within 0.5 miles (in a straight line) of each other</td>
<td>This criteria aims to combine multiple stops that are very close to each other to ensure that the service can still be provided to the maximum number of communities. The timing and location of any combined stops would be based upon engagement with affected users and communities.</td>
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Demand: Mobile library stop to be withdrawn if it is unused for 3 consecutive visits

These criteria will ensure that the service does not continue to be provided where there is very low demand for it, where there are more cost-effective ways of delivering library services (such as the Home Library Service). Making savings means that the Council can continue to afford to provide services where demand is greater. A regular user is proposed to be defined as someone using the mobile library 6 times in a year.

In exceptional circumstances the criteria may not be applied because to do so would not adequately reflect need and demand. An example of this might be the mobile library stop in Steart which, whilst less than 3 miles in a straight line from the nearest library (Burnham), is separated from Burnham by the River Parrett and is more than 3 miles from the next nearest library (Nether Stowey).

The Council proposes to provide £15,000 one-off grant funding to support affected communities develop alternative library services which meets their needs, with potential individual grants of up to £500. The approach to these grants is deliberately not fixed at this point in time to enable affected communities to help contribute and shape the Council’s thinking. For example, a grant might support a community in establishing a pick-up/drop-off point for books in a local pub, shop or village hall, or to purchase e-readers for use by the local community.

In addition to communities, mobile libraries also visit many institutions, and the following changes are proposed to these services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of institution</th>
<th>Proposed change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Playgroup/children’s centres/schools – 41 currently visited</td>
<td>Maintain service and have discussions with individual institutions about how their needs can be best met.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residential / Nursing home – 13 currently visited</td>
<td>Transfer to the Home Library Service in order to provide a more personalised service, and to expand this service to serve more people in more homes.</td>
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</table>

Why are we proposing this change?

The Council recognises that the mobile library service provides a valued service to rural communities where need and demand justifies it. The proposed criteria reflect:

- The availability of alternatives, including the Home Library Service (available to those who cannot easily visit a library) and the Good Neighbour Scheme (where someone accesses a library on a members behalf to borrow books) though only 5% of mobile users told us that they were aware of these services
- The increased range of resources, including e-books, available online (with 51% of mobile users telling the Council that they have access to the internet at home, though only 22% were aware of the online resources available)
- The evidence that many mobile library users also use library buildings
• The availability of transport to library buildings. 58% of mobile users previously surveyed told the Council they have access to their own vehicle, and 95% of those communities within 3 miles of a library building are covered by community transport

• Many stops are currently poorly used - 121 of current stops have less than 3 registered members, and 141 stops had less than one person visit them on average each time the mobile stopped in 2013/14

• The phasing in of the criteria reflects the Council’s view that services should first be limited to those communities with greatest need (those more than 3 miles from a library building or more than half a mile from another mobile stop), that where there is no demand for the service it should be withdrawn, but those communities where there is little regular use of the service should be given more time to get used to the changes

What will be the effect of these changes?

If these proposals were implemented then this would result in:

• Savings of around £60,000 per year through reducing from 4 mobile vehicles to 2

• A reduction in the number of stops made from 574 to 235, with further potential reductions in future if the level of use remains very low. Before any changes to stops are made there will be engagement with the community and affected users to support them in accessing suitable alternative library services. Of these changes:
  o 267 stops would be withdrawn in August 2015 because they are within 3 miles of a library building
  o 100 stops within 0.5 miles of each other would be combined into 41 revised stops in August 2015
  o 13 stops at residential homes or sheltered housing would instead be supported by the Home Library Service from August 2015

From August 2015 onwards we will regularly review whether any stops have been completely unused for at least 3 months. These will be potentially withdrawn following engagement with the community. It is not proposed to withdraw services from those stops with less than three regular users until 2016.

A table showing the potential impact of these criteria is available online, in mobile library vehicles, in library buildings and upon request.

What is the Council looking for feedback on?

Whilst all views and comments are welcome and will inform any decision, the Council particularly welcomes views on:

• Whether there are any impacts on affected communities which need greater account taken of
• Where there might be cases for exceptions to the criteria
• Whether there is demand for a grant to support communities to develop a locally-led alternative to the mobile library service
Proposal 4: Phase out the lending of CDs

Summary

In response to falling demand and income from the CD lending service the Council proposes to stop purchasing new CDs, saving £10,000 in 2015/16. The current stock of CDs would still be available in the 9 libraries that currently offer this service. The service will be completely withdrawn when it is no longer cost effective to provide it.

Background

CDs are available in Bridgwater, Burnham, Chard, Frome, Glastonbury, Street, Taunton, Wells and Yeovil libraries. In 2013-14 6,032 people hired CDs with a total number of 24,680 transactions made. CDs are loaned for a period of 2 weeks at a charge of 75p. In 2013-14 the Council spent £14,200 on purchasing 1,775 new CDs.

What changes are proposed?

The proposed change is to stop purchasing new CDs from 2015/16 onwards. The current stock of around 15,000 CDs would still be available in the 9 libraries that currently offer this service. It is proposed to withdraw the service entirely when the level of demand means that it is no longer cost effective to provide it.

Why are we proposing this change?

The borrowing of CDs has been declining for some time, with income falling by over 50% in the last three years. This trend is expected to continue, and soon income is likely to be below the cost of providing the service. Only 22% of CD issues in the period April-July 2014 were from new CDs (items purchased in the previous 12 months) and in a recent survey of users, only 32% told the Council that they mainly browse new stock in order to find something they like. This suggests that while new releases are of interest, users mostly find something to borrow from the existing stock. The survey revealed that the vast majority of current users also buy their own CDs (82%) and have access to the internet at home (89%), though less than half currently listen on-line or download music.

What will be the effect of these changes?

If no new CDs are purchased it is likely that, whilst people will continue to borrow CDs, fewer will be borrowed and income will fall. Informed by the consultation, the Council will work with affected customers to identify whether any support or potential alternatives are suitable.

What is the Council looking for feedback on?

Whilst all views and comments are welcome and will inform any decision, the Council particularly welcomes views on:

- How the Council could support CD borrowers to access suitable alternatives
Proposal 5: Deliver the Performing Arts Library service in a different way

Summary

The Council proposes to deliver the Performing Arts Library service in a different way by a combination of reducing costs and increasing income. This would enable a specialist performing arts service to remain open for public access in Yeovil Library.

Background

The Performing Arts Library (PAL) provides a specialist music and drama lending service based in Yeovil library and opens 6 days a week (47.5 hours). Approximately 200 individuals and 700 groups are registered with the service, and it is a particularly important resource to amateur groups such as choral and amateur dramatic societies. Music and drama sets are lent for around 4 months on average.

Somerset has the largest such library in the region. The direct net cost of providing this service is around £75,000. The only charges for the service are request fees applied in certain circumstances. There is no restriction on how long an item can be reserved for, nor how many sets are reserved.

What changes are proposed?

Reflecting on the feedback from focus groups held with a cross-section of PAL users on what they most value about the service, the Council’s preferred approach is to:

- Retain the specialist service in Yeovil library but reduce costs by around £30,000 through:
  - Reducing the availability of specialist staffing to 36 hours per week (for example 10am – 4pm, 6 days per week)
  - More effectively integrating PAL staff with other parts of the library service, in particular in Yeovil library, so that specialist staff are focussed more on performing arts related activities

- Introduce annual subscription charges for groups. The indicative annual charge would be in the region of £30 to £60, with higher charges for larger groups and highest charges for those groups located outside of Somerset. This may realise around £30,000 in additional income, though this will be highly dependent upon the number of groups that are willing to pay to retain the specialist service.

- To introduce:
  - Loan periods of around 3 to 5 months and to introduce overdue charges
  - Further charges for customers outside Somerset to ensure that full costs are recovered
A revised set of charges for transactions for Somerset users, for example to ensure that a greater proportion of the costs of sourcing and delivering stock from other libraries are passed onto users.

The Council will also look to work more closely with the music and drama sector, for example through a potential friends group, and to promote the service more effectively across Somerset and beyond.

**Why are we proposing this change?**

We are proposing this change because the Council wants to keep this specialist (but largely non-statutory) service as it provides many benefits to the local performing arts sector. However, it needs to cover a much greater proportion of its current costs in order for the service to be affordable for the Council. The service currently costs more than the 6 smallest libraries in Somerset put together.

Charges can potentially be made for other aspects of the service. Some other authorities apply other charges, including subscription charges, loan fees, and delivery charges. Review of other Performing Arts Libraries and focus groups held with a cross-section of users of Somerset’s service suggested that a subscription charge, set at an affordable level, could make a significant contribution to reducing the net cost of the service.

Whilst it is estimated that around 80% of customers access the service by phone or email rather than face to face, users have stressed the high value they place on both specialist advice and the ability to browse stock. Proposals to reduce the cost of the service have therefore been designed to retain specialist face to face access.

Whilst PAL is a county-wide service over 66% of its customers come from the South Somerset area, only 2% come from West Somerset and some 20% come from outside the County. This has driven the Council’s thinking that it needs to work more closely with the sector to promote PAL across the whole of Somerset, and that it is not considered reasonable that Somerset taxpayers effectively subsidise users outside of the County where the Council has no statutory duty to provide services.

In the medium term there may be other options which could be explored including trading the specialist service outside of the County or exploring working in close partnership with other such services, other similar organisations or creating a Trust. Implementation of the Council’s preferred option would not preclude these medium term options.

**What will be the effect of these changes?**

The effect of reducing costs is expected to realise annual savings of around £30,000, and the introduction of subscription charges may realise around £30,000 additional income – though this will be highly dependent upon the number of groups that are willing to pay to retain the specialist service.

The changes will ensure that the face to face access, ability to browse stock and specialist knowledge that users have told the Council they value will remain.
Introducing loan periods will help ensure that stock is more widely available through greater turnover.

The risks associated with getting transaction costs wrong (e.g. setting them too high and significantly reducing demand for services) means that the Council is consulting now on the principle of additional transaction costs, and intends to work with users of the service to ensure that these are set at an appropriate level.

**What is the Council looking for feedback on?**

Whilst all views and comments are welcome and will inform any decision, the Council particularly welcomes views on:

- How the Performing Arts Library can work more effectively in partnership with the performing arts sector in Somerset
- The potential level for any transaction charges
- Alternative options that exist to deliver the service differently, including but not limited to:
  - Removing face to face access by moving PAL out of Yeovil library, but retaining specialist advice accessible by phone or email and making it easier for customers to borrow stock through online transactions
  - Ending the specialist service, relocating the service and ending face to face access. Customers would be able to browse a catalogue online at home or from a local library, with some stock available to browse in libraries
  - Transferring most of the stock to an existing voluntary or community sector group with no future library service involvement
Proposal 6: Seek alternative suggestions for changes to Library Services that ensure we meet need and demand in a value for money way.

Summary

The set of proposals described in this consultation seek to ensure that Library Services are comprehensive and efficient whilst reflecting the Council’s financial challenges.

The County Council has made no decisions on what savings or changes might be needed in Library Services beyond March 2016 and will continue to explore all options. These include:

- Making more efficient use of space thereby reducing running costs, in particular in those libraries serving larger communities where there is more opportunity to bring a number of services together under one roof
- Exploring different ways that library services can be delivered for example by social enterprises, charitable trusts or other organisations outside the Council. The Council wants to continue to work closely with Friends Groups.

What is the Council looking for feedback on?

Whilst all views and comments are welcome and will inform any decision, the Council particularly welcomes views on:

- Alternative proposals and ideas, particularly those with outline levels of expected savings.
To request this document in an alternative format or different language, please contact:

Call: 0845 345 9177
Email: LibraryServicesReview@somerset.gov.uk

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