

Best Value Review of Sandwell Library Service

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General background.

“What do Users Want?”

In Sandwell, following extensive consultation, we identified that Users want everything: that is all the existing core services improved and a whole range of new services introduced, using the new ICT technologies.

We then decided that the role of members and officers should therefore be to give them everything they require.

The Review in Sandwell was undertaken against a backdrop of potential £350,000 budget cut, including a real cut of £100,000 to the book fund.

Following the review the whole £350,000 was re-instated.

Sandwell has the average number of libraries for its CIPFA Family Group i.e. 19 and 2 mobiles, following two library closures two years ago.

The Review addressed the issue of fewer, better libraries but rejected it in Sandwell because we only had the average number and because of the expected loss of library use. People would not travel.

The consultation did not seek to lead people in any particular direction or to any preconceived set of options.

Methodology.

The Review was conducted by a Working Group of staff volunteers from all levels and areas of the service. They did much of the work and wrote up the outcomes and issues.

Consultation.

Consultation was extensive, including 4,000 individuals (users, non-users, lapsed users) and 140 institutions (local schools, Citizen's Advice Bureau, Health Authority etc) and library staff.

Extensive consultation by and with Library User Groups and Federation of Library User Groups was also a key feature.

Consultation methods included:

- Ⓒ Surveys, CIPFA, street surveys, telephone and postal. (open questions)
- Ⓒ Open Meetings, in non library venues, throughout the Borough
- Ⓒ Comments Books, during review and over the last three years
- Ⓒ Focus Groups, e.g. staff focus group facilitated externally
- Ⓒ Complaints, Comments Compliments scheme, during review and summary of last three years
- Ⓒ Literature search, other library reviews and national and regional context.
- Ⓒ Staff did the consultation and were directly involved at all stages including writing it up.
- Ⓒ Some User Groups helped with the street survey and other aspects of the consultation.

Outcomes of consultation, “What do Users want?”.

Vital issue was local access. People would accept any standard of service if it was kept local. People would not travel.

Evidence of previous closures in Sandwell is that library users had stopped using libraries altogether, because they could or would not travel to other libraries. We developed a computer model that could predict the impact on library membership of closing any particular library. This evidence convinced Members that library closures would be counter-productive.

Convergence on all key issues from staff, users, non-users, elected members and national government:

- Ⓒ improve existing core services e.g. bookstock, range, breadth and depth.
- Ⓒ increased bookfund to at least CIPFA Family average.
- Ⓒ improve access to new ICT services, not at expense of other core services
- Ⓒ importance of educational and lifelong learning role of libraries
- Ⓒ continuing and growing importance of reading and literacy
- Ⓒ importance of information role of libraries
- Ⓒ importance of local access to libraries
- Ⓒ requirement for a Central Library for the Borough, but not at the expense of local libraries
- Ⓒ extended opening hours, re-instating previous reductions
- Ⓒ Improved levels of front line staffing and improved training and development
- Ⓒ improved marketing of services
- Ⓒ new dedicated centre for the Archives service.

Changes delivered so far within existing target budgets.

- £ Extended midweek opening hours at two libraries and extended Saturday opening at three other libraries
- £ Increased levels of front line staffing, (via management and support savings)
- £ modest bookfund increase
- £ ICT training and taster courses for older people
- £ Free Internet access at all 19 libraries
- £ Major lobbying and council support for new central library, new Archives site and increased bookfund
- £ Launch of new learning centres at all libraries early in new year

Outcome conclusions

Major shift within the Council in terms of the image and profile of the library service.

Re-affirmation of the importance of libraries and the vital importance of local access.

Access is the fundamental issue for older and younger people.

No budget cuts over last three year period, and non predicted.

Clear focus and priorities for the next few years.

Real three-way partnership between Elected Members, Staff and Users.

Find out what Users want and make every effort to give it to them.

