

# Decisions of the Community Leadership and Libraries Committee

5 March 2020

Members Present:-

Councillor Reuben Thompstone (Chairman)  
Councillor Roberto Weeden-Sanz (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr Nagus Narenthira (substitute)  
Cllr Sara Conway  
Cllr Brian Gordon  
Cllr Helen Richman  
Cllr Lachhya Bahadur Gurung

Apologies for Absence

Cllr Charlie O-Macauley

Cllr Reema Patel  
Cllr Danny Rich

## 1. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

**RESOLVED** that the minutes were approved as an accurate record.

## 2. ABSENCE OF MEMBERS (IF ANY)

Apologies were received from Cllr Danny Rich, Cllr Reema Patel and Cllr O-Macauley. Cllr O-Macauley was substituted by Cllr Nagus Narenthira.

## 3. DECLARATION OF MEMBERS' DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND NON PECUNIARY INTERESTS (IF ANY)

Cllr Conway declared an interest under Item 7, noting that she is a Member of the Jewish Volunteering Networks Advisory Board.

## 4. REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER (IF ANY)

None.

## 5. PUBLIC COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS (IF ANY)

### Item 7 – Future Direction of the Community Participation Strategy

A question from Barbara Jacobson and an officer's response were published prior to the meeting. Ms Jacobson was invited to the table to ask a supplementary question.

Question: 'How do the Resident Forums which do not relate to the issues discussed at the Theme Committees replace the type of feedback previously allowed at Theme Committees and actually involve residents in decision making?'

The Chairman responded that Resident Forums were not intended to provide the same function as Theme Committees. To facilitate questions and comments in a fair way amongst residents Barnet's Public Participation Rules had been changed by Full Council. Resident Forums were held so that residents could raise a variety of issues.

### **Item 8 – Independent Evaluation of the Library Service**

A question from Emily Burnham and an officer's response were published prior to the meeting. Ms Burnham was invited to the table to ask a supplementary question.

Question: The report states that Barnet Council has saved £1.1 million. Can you confirm this figure does not include the cost of security guards at unstaffed libraries?

The Head of Library Services responded: the cost of security guards is not part of the libraries' budget so this is not included.

A question from Cherry Sewell and an officer's response were published prior to the meeting. Ms Sewell was invited to the table to ask a supplementary question.

Question: Have you known since 2016 that you would not be able to rent out commercial space at South Friern Library? If not, when did you find out that it was too expensive to convert and could not be let out?

The Head of Library Services responded that this was a matter for the Estates Team and was not within the remit of the Library Service. However, the decision not to make a hard division of the space did not preclude it being let out.

A written comment was received from Keith Martin. This was published prior to the meeting, and noted.

### **6. MEMBERS' ITEMS (IF ANY)**

None.

### **7. INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF THE LIBRARY SERVICE**

The Chairman announced that he would vary the agenda order due to the residents attending for the item on the library service.

He invited Mr Eric Bohl, Director, Activist Group to the table to speak to his presentation on its independent review of Barnet's library service. Mr Bohl commented that the four main areas of the findings were outlined in the report:

- Vision and strategy
- Infrastructure: IT and buildings
- Service offer and take-up
- Budgets and staffing

Mr Bohl stated that Barnet Council had requested an honest appraisal. Activist had carried out a consultation, conducted mystery shopping and tours of the libraries, completed a CIPFA study and discussed the libraries with a large number of people. Mr Bohl summarised the key points of the report:

- In line with many other library services around the country, due to financial constraints staffing hours had had to be reduced in Barnet's libraries. Barnet had a gap in its volunteering provision and this had exacerbated the impact of the reduction in staffing hours on users.
- Another criticism in the report was that Barnet could have a better understanding of the libraries as an asset.
- Activist was impressed by the Library Service's clarity of vision.
- The interiors were dull and interior space was insufficient, with noise and poor signage being reported as problems.
- Opening times of toilets seemed to be a barrier for users.
- Technology, particularly visitor account issues, was a problem.
- It had been difficult to access sufficient data to assess performance fully.
- There had been teething problems with Self Service Opening (SSO) and SSO was not popular with users. The age limit was a barrier for young people and many parents supported lowering the age limit.
- Library Managers and staff were held in high esteem by residents whom Activist had spoken to and were a credit to Barnet Council.

The report recommended:

- There should be more investment in interior design and exterior signage.
- The root cause of the IT problems should be investigated and if suppliers had failed in their provision they should be made to fix issues.
- Piloting keeping toilets open during SSO hours.
- Piloting a phased reduction in age limit for younger people.
- The Book Fund is at its limit and further reductions could cause a downward spiral of the service.
- PCs were used extensively and were being replaced as they should be.
- There was an extensive programme of events for children and young adults which was rare in comparison to many library services.
- Staffed opening hours are very low and this has an impact on the sense of security for many people. It would be helpful to extend the staffed opening hours, with an increase in employees or volunteers. Activist was impressed by the commitment of the staff and volunteers running the Partnership Libraries. However, volunteering in Barnet was bottom in the CIPFA comparison group and the strategy to date around volunteering had been weak. Volunteering had to be set up and coordinated as a project by staff. There should be a long-term volunteering plan with dedicated volunteer coordinator posts.
- Book borrowing had fallen, but due to problems with the data, visitor numbers were not known.
- Some Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were needed to see how service changes have an impact on use of the libraries.
- The capital programme should be completed with investment in signage and interiors.
- If additional resources can be found, additional staffing should be provided to coordinate a volunteering plan as this could mitigate the impact on users.

The Chairman thanked Mr Bohl for the report. The Chairman invited Cllr Conway to meet with himself and officers to consider a formal response to the report, outside the meeting.

Members were invited to ask questions.

Question: A Member asked how volunteering could be increased and whether such an ambitious strategy is achievable.

Mr Bohl responded that with some local authorities it had not been feasible. It was easy to underestimate the amount of work involved in setting up volunteering. However the London Borough of Merton, which has some characteristics similar to Barnet, has extensive volunteering in its libraries, making up 1/3 of staff presence. He stated that the strategy for Barnet looked achievable since so much had already been implemented but more resource would be needed.

A Member asked what could be done to encourage volunteering.

The Head of Library Services responded that difficult choices had been made around resources and it had been decided that the Partnership Libraries would be the initial focus. These were now running well so attention could be focused on the volunteering programme. Some SSO volunteers had already been recruited.

A Member asked whether the actual number of visitors was much higher than suggested in the report.

Mr Bohl stated that the visitor count was likely to be much higher than detailed in the report as the figures were incomplete. The Head of Library Services noted that current calculations suggested around 901,850 visitors.

A Member asked what training had been provided for volunteers and whether they felt prepared to carry out their duties? The Head of Library Services reported that all volunteers received varied training including safeguarding, data protection and specific training to their role.

A Member enquired how different areas of Barnet might be disproportionately disadvantaged by the age limit. In Colindale many children did not have home IT at home compared to more affluent areas.

Mr Bohl responded that there appears to be a greater impact on young people, and a more negative impact on some than others. The report recommended piloting a reduced age limit for entry although national guidance suggested that the current age limit in Barnet is appropriate. This would need careful consideration.

A Member asked how volunteers were recruited. The Head of Library Services noted that advertisements were placed in libraries, on the Barnet website and social media. In the past Community Barnet had worked with the libraries to recruit volunteers. A Member suggested that training/qualifications be used to make volunteering more attractive.

A Member asked whether volunteers were DBS checked. If the age limit is reduced there is a safeguarding concern. The Head of Library Services responded that checks were the same as those for staff but there were strict rules on DBS checks on SSO volunteers and staff.

Cllr Conway declared that she is a member of the Jewish Volunteering Networks Advisory Board (JVNAB) and has worked a lot in the charity sector. She thanked the Save Barnet Libraries Campaign and Unison for their support and thanked officers for discussing the report with her. She expressed concern that Barnet may not be meeting its statutory duty in terms of staffing. Volunteers were very helpful where appropriate but there should not be too much reliance on them. The JVNAB is ready and keen to support volunteering and a phased programme was needed.

A Member commented that for safeguarding reasons alone staffing hours should be extended and appropriate DBS checks should be made. The Head of Library Services reported that she was guided by human resources (HR) on DBS checking and was by law unable to carry out DBS checks on volunteers. Volunteers were supervised by members of staff who were DBS checked and she continued to take instruction from HR.

Cllr Conway noted that the Committee had received a list from the Estates Team of leasing of commercial spaces in libraries. She expressed concern that some spaces that had not been let out could have been used by the community.

A Member reported that Burnt Oak Library is the hub of the community, has one of the highest visitor counts, and desperately needed refurbishment.

Cllr Conway tabled the following amendments to the recommendations provided in the Evaluation Report:

Recommendation 3: That the Committee notes the report findings including that the “reduction in staffed opening hours has gone too far”, and that unstaffed opening “deters many library users” and excludes young people and people with disabilities.

Recommendation 4: That the Committee agrees that staffed opening hours should be increased and instructs officers to bring back proposals to the next meeting.

Recommendation 5: That the Committee should also agree and instruct officers to implement at least the following key recommendations from the report:

- ‘A review of space in the “busiest” library buildings.
- Increase the media fund (for books etc) in line with inflation.
- Review the extent of budget reductions and explore the scope of additional investment in the service given the relative decline in the take up of the service”.
- Independently investigate the lack of visitor data working with relevant partners like Capita.
- Introduce regular monitoring by the Committee to “identify the ongoing impact of the transformation programme”.

Recommendation 5: That the Committee instructs officers to include a standing item at every CLLC meeting on the library programme, including a focus on the key issues of staffing and insufficient study space.

Recommendation 6: That the Committee requests that the Housing and Growth Committee regularly updates its members on the progress of commercial hire of library spaces and expenditure on security staff, commits to including library provision (including study space and accessible toilets) in regeneration plans; and looks at key buildings failings and proper refurbishment of current sites.

The Chairman responded that the decision on a standing item for Housing and Growth Committee could only be made by the Chairman of that Committee. He asked that Cllr Conway withdraw her recommendations and that the matters be considered with Cllr Conway outside the meeting as part of the response to the report.

Cllr Conway raised an alternative motion that the matters above be discussed at the next CLLC meeting. The Chairman suggested that the alternative motion be withdrawn to allow officers sufficient time to consider the report thoroughly. He noted that he would be happy to meet with Cllr Conway and officers prior to the June meeting to consider a way forward.

A Member asked whether any incentives for volunteers had been put in place. The Head of Library Services responded that in the past there had been an annual volunteer celebration event with certificates provided and agreed that schemes such as this should be reintroduced.

A Member asked how toilets with disabled access could be improved and whether DBS checks could be reconsidered as volunteers would come into contact with vulnerable adults and children. The Head of Library Services agreed to revisit the matter of DBS checks with HR.

A Member noted that a volunteer cannot replace a professional and staffing levels remained a concern. She recommended that this be discussed with professional librarians to find a way forward.

A Member asked for clarification on how volunteers were vetted. The Head of Library Services noted that they were interviewed and all volunteers in the Partnership Libraries are DBS checked. The scheme was currently small scale and she would learn from Merton and others to improve the recruitment process. Adequate protocols were in place.

The Chairman moved to the recommendations in the report. He noted that Cllr Conway agreed to withdraw the amendments and that these would be considered as part of the Committee's response to the report.

**The Committee unanimously RESOLVED to consider the findings and recommendations of the independent report.**

## **8. FUTURE DIRECTION OF THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION STRATEGY**

The CEO commented that the Community Participation Strategy offered opportunities to strengthen the voluntary sector in Barnet including recruiting more volunteers. The report on the libraries offered an important starting point to focus on opportunities in other areas such as litter picking and adult social care.

The Deputy Head of Strategy reported that annual updates on the Community Participation Strategy were provided to CLLC and an update would follow in November 2020. The latest update coincided with some changes and provided an opportunity to rethink current progress and to inform future work with residents. From March to November there would be a process of stakeholder engagement to explore some of workstreams identified in the report with a focus on stronger local networks.

The Deputy Head of Strategy noted that Councillors were an important element of the strategy, particularly in their role as Ward Members as they can ensure residents' views are fed back.

A Member noted that Barnet has a multi-racial population and it was important to not pressurise residents who would be keen to retain their separate identities, though they could still get along with each other. The Deputy Head of Strategy acknowledged this adding that it is a strength with faith communities providing key hubs in Barnet.

The CEO agreed, adding that there was huge strength and faith and multi-faith groups but the Council did not wish to impose too much control. It would have a coordinating and support role and there may be areas that the Council is not aware of but could provide support to.

A Member asked whether a register of community groups was available. Also, it was important to avoid them duplicating work. It was also not clear where funding was available. The litter picking volunteers operated in Colindale twice per month but street cleaning was a Council duty and they were not receiving help from the Council and could be overburdened, without support from officers.

The Chairman noted that he did not feel that there was anything negative about residents willing to do some litter picking. The Council is fulfilling its statutory duty but residents were taking responsibility for their area. The Deputy Head of Strategy noted that the strategy aimed to celebrate civic pride. The Barnet Community Directory had previously listed community groups online but this had not been comprehensive. Work would begin on a single database.

The Strategy Officer commented that for the past eight months the team had been supporting, promoting and celebrating the work of the litter picking groups. Many volunteers were involved in other areas also, such as schools, and reported feeling that they are part of the bigger picture in Barnet. Schools were also keen to take part in community work. The Strategy Team is working with the Barnet Federation of GPs to develop a directory of services that will provide the Council with information on groups that are under the radar. Social prescribing link workers could do social prescribing to these groups also, to reduce social isolation.

A Member noted that it would be helpful to have a framework around interfaith work to help people of different faiths communicate with one another.

A Member noted that it was important to create a sense of community in the large regeneration areas such as Colindale. Some areas were encountering problems such as Belle Vue Estate with almost no community engagement.

A Member noted that it was a concern that children were joining in with the litter picking, considering safeguarding issues. For example, used needles had been found during a recent litter pick. Also there could be too much pressure and over-reliance on the community to pick up other people's rubbish. In some areas the same residents were left with the burden of litter picking and civic resilience needed to be developed with cross-borough volunteering.

The CEO responded that Barnet Council had recognised that more could be done around street cleansing; he also did not wish to stifle the enthusiasm and civic pride of residents who were willing to volunteer. Barnet had provided an extra £500,000 for street

cleansing this municipal year and in the upcoming budget could look to add more. Fly tipping was a large and growing issue in the Borough and the Council was trying to respond to this. Other London Boroughs were facing similar issues.

A Member commented that Residents' Forums had a reduced number of attendees compared to years ago. It was important to engage different groups. Also residents may congregate on the Borough's boundaries so it may be worth focusing on religious groups and other organisations, mosques etc just outside the Borough when considering engagement.

**The Committee unanimously RESOLVED to note the plans to develop a new Community Participation Strategy.**

## **9. Q3 19/20 DELIVERY PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The Chairman introduced the report.

A Member stated that she would not rate Barnet as 'good' for environmental crime. A KPI was needed and much more action.

A Member noted that there needed to be a better link on major issues from Ward Councillors on community safety to help to escalate issues at partnership level.

Cllr Conway asked the following:

- Whether 101 calls only, or also online reporting, was included in the ASB calls.
- Why was Barnet rated 'good' for hate crime, if it had only achieved 3 out of 7?
- Where are the 9 reporting centres? These were not well publicised.

The Director of Assurance would respond after the meeting and would circulate this to the Committee.

**Action: Director of Assurance**

**The Committee unanimously RESOLVED to note the Quarter 3 2019/20 Delivery Plan Performance Report.**

## **10. REFRESH OF ANNUAL DELIVERY PLANS FOR 2020/21**

The Chairman introduced the report.

**The Committee unanimously RESOLVED to approve the Annual Delivery Plan for 2020/21 as set out in Appendix A.**

## **11. COMMITTEE FORWARD PLAN**

The Committee received the Forward Plan.

Cllr Conway requested the following:

- Coronavirus to be a standing item at CLLC or whichever Committee this would be appropriate as this is a community safety issue.
- The BCU item to be discussed at the next meeting.

- Environmental crime to be discussed at the next meeting.
- That the impact of regeneration on community cohesion and community safety be discussed by CLLC.
- At the last meeting of Safer Communities Partnership Board, there was a presentation from the London Fire Brigade about housing and fires, and the work the LFB is doing. It would be helpful to discuss this at CLLC in relation to some of the estates where concerns had been raised about how people were being housed.

The Chairman noted that these would be considered individually outside the meeting. Cllr Conway could forward further information if she wished and he would discuss this with officers to find appropriate committees and reports for those issues.

Cllr Gordon commented that there should be a focus on hate crime at a meeting of CLLC. The Chairman asked Cllr Gordon to put together a Member's Item.

**The Committee RESOLVED to note the Forward Plan.**

**12. ANY ITEM(S) THE CHAIRMAN DECIDES ARE URGENT**

None.

The meeting finished at 9.01 pm