

Shaping our Future: a programme for change

Response to Midlothian Council Consultation on proposed changes to library services

The Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals in Scotland is the membership body for librarians, information specialists and knowledge managers. Many of our members are employed in Scotland's public libraries.

We note the need for the Council to deliver £350,000 of savings by 2018 and regret the response is a proposal to close all Branch libraries (8), withdraw the mobile library service and provide a single service from Midlothian Central Library. We understand these proposals will impact on 30-40 staff. At a time when the Scottish Government is driving the implementation of approaches to community development and poverty reduction which build on local 'assets' including the public library network it is difficult to see how the proposed closures fit with this ambition.

The recently launched Scottish Government Programme, '*A nation with Ambition*'ⁱ features a number of key policy proposals which have libraries at their core. These include:

- Refreshing the National Strategy for Public Libraries;
- Piloting a single library card for use in any Council library across Scotland;
- Providing support for coding clubs in libraries; and
- Introducing a targeted programme around the 'Every Child a Library Member' initiative

Covering an area of 355 square kilometres and with a population of 87,000, much of Midlothian is rural, suffers from high levels of social exclusion and underachievement in schools. The area's deprivation level rose from 7% in 2012 to 11% in 2016. There is a large young and retired segment, with children and young people aged 21 and under accounting for over a quarter of the population, a higher than average number of lone parent households and below average education attainment levels.ⁱⁱ

Libraries offer the capacity to contribute to many policy and social goals and to contribute to digital participation and engagement, to education, an informed citizenry, health literacy and culture. There are many researched examples of how public libraries deliver on key policy priorities, improve opportunities for citizens and make a meaningful contribution to social and individual wellbeing.ⁱⁱⁱ

We believe that libraries are central to safer stronger communities by serving as a safe social hub and contributing to government goals of:

- reducing inequalities
- building resilience
- supporting vulnerable young people^{iv}

Other research by Carnegie UK found that a majority of people say public libraries are important for communities. Rather than closing libraries, that same research found that people wanted to see more

activities such as events taking place in libraries. Indeed public libraries remain the most popular service local government can provide.^v

CILIPS understands that proposals being considered include non-staffed facilities and volunteer operated services and would offer the following observations:

Volunteers in libraries can add value where they are complementary/additional to existing staff and able to extend and enrich the services on offer. CILIPS does not support the substitution of paid staff by volunteers and we do not support volunteers being used for delivery of core services. Indeed research indicates that while the public broadly support the use of volunteers to augment existing staff they remain opposed to volunteers replacing staff.^{vi}

The Midlothian Council proposals suggest that non-staffed facilities may be 'feasible'. Non-staffed facilities can range from self service issue and return, card operated entry to a staffless library. It's not clear to which of these your proposals refer. CILIPS believes that where open library technology is used to extend and improve an existing library service, it may have a useful role. But we do not advocate such technology as a replacement for core services carried out by library staff on a daily basis. Libraries need to be accessible and safe for users who require support from library staff. We would be concerned that those with additional support needs may struggle to use the service.

In conclusion, we are deeply concerned about the proposed changes to Midlothian library services, the scale of closures and the impact on the local community if the cuts go ahead.

ⁱ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/09/8468>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/08/6427>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/speaking-volumes-leaflet-to-view/>

^{iv} <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/library-as-learning-hub/>

^v <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/shining-a-light/>

^{vi} Ibid.