

Agenda Item: 8 vi)

8th January 2018

Engagement, Participation and Involvement Team
Northamptonshire County Council
One Angel Square
Angel Street
Northampton
NN1 1ED

Dear Sir or Madam,

Re: Northamptonshire Libraries and Information Service Review 2017 Consultation

This is the formal response from Healthwatch Northamptonshire to the above consultation, based on feedback from members of our Planning Group, which is made up of a wide range of people, many of whom have links with various local voluntary sector user and carer organisations, as well as their own experience of libraries and the wider range of services currently offered.

We have also had feedback from 68 individuals around the county who responded to our online poll focussed on library usage. 57% reported they used their local library at least once a week, whilst 71% said they used the library fortnightly or more often. In response to a question about the nature of their last visit to the library, 60% reported it was to borrow books. 16% said to use the children's services based in the library building. A quotation from one respondent who uses Burton Latimer Library, was "our local library is so much more than just for borrowing books". A separate response has been submitted from Young Healthwatch Northamptonshire.

It is noted that under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, there is a statutory duty to provide a "comprehensive and efficient library service". We are aware that "comprehensive" cannot mean that every resident lives close to a library. However, it is noted from the court case between Draper v Lincolnshire County Council (2014) that "The key is reasonable ability to access the service, by all residents of the county. This means that distances and time taken to reach a library must be reasonable and any particular problems, whether physical disabilities, or created by age or family considerations, must be capable of being met."

Our members feel that none of the proposed options would meet the above criteria. In fact, the situation will be exacerbated by the proposed review of bus subsidies, which it is feared will result in the loss of some rural bus routes, leaving the County Council open to a legal challenge that they made an unlawful decision. There is concern about the

Cont'd / ...



Healthwatch Northamptonshire
3rd Floor Lakeside House
The Lakes, Bedford Road, Northampton, NN4 7HD
T: 0300 002 0010 E: enquiries@healthwatchnorthamptonshire.co.uk
W: www.healthwatchnorthamptonshire.co.uk
Connected Together Community Interest Company
Registered in England and Wales. Company No. 8496240



... / Cont'd

lack of a “No Change” option, which suggests that the decision for change has already been predetermined by the County Council and there is no intention of taking into account other options.

Members were particularly concerned that the proposals would result in the forced closure of children’s centres which currently use library premises as a base. There were concerns when the separate children’s centres were closed and the services transferred to libraries. However, there was an acceptance of the change and a hope that this would ensure a more secure future for both the children’s centres and local libraries. Parents now feel extremely let down. Given the huge level of new housing development across the county, particularly in rural areas, there will be a continuing high level of need for children’s centre services in the coming years, so the prospect of losing between 13 and 19 children’s centre services located in libraries is extremely shortsighted.

Members felt local libraries represented more than a book lending service and were really valuable local community hubs where local residents could access a range of other services such as, registering and applying for blue badges, bus passes, free IT support, children’s clubs and activities.

It was stressed that there are valuable links between local primary schools and libraries, which enable primary aged children to become familiar with the library and the various activities/services offered.

Libraries are also “safe” places which people who lack social confidence, have issues/problems such as mental ill health, alcohol and/or drug abuse can more easily access as they are seen as non threatening. The local Mental Health Concordat have identified loneliness and isolation as significant issues and suggested libraries are crucial in helping alleviate this.

In recent years, there has been an increasing acknowledgement of the value of “social prescribing”, and libraries have been identified as ideal bases for the development of social prescribing. From a rural perspective, the local library is often the only public building where everyone is welcome. Members felt there had been insufficient acknowledgement of Northamptonshire’s large rural areas and that the 3 library options represented discrimination against rural communities.

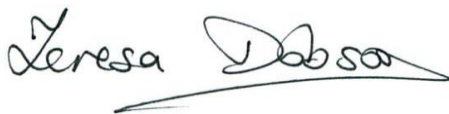
Healthwatch Northamptonshire has grave concerns about the incomplete Equality Impact Assessments. We have been advised that it is planned to use the current consultation process as the basis to engage with all protected groups. What plans are there to publish a fully completed Equality Impact Assessment prior to the decisions being taken on the future of the Libraries and Information Service, so that all stakeholders can see and make comments on them? It is vital that the statutory processes are adhered to, as without them the consultation process will be illegal.

Cont'd/ ...

... / Cont'd

Finally, members were extremely concerned about the proposal to hand over libraries to local communities and rely so much on local volunteers. It was felt particularly inappropriate because it is a statutory service and librarians are well established highly qualified professionals. Whilst, the involvement of volunteers to support the service is now well established and valued in many areas, the direction the County Council is now proposing for the Library Service will result in "job replacement", which is not acceptable. In addition, with the rise in the retirement age, and more people finding they need to work past retirement age, where will the army of volunteers come from to replace the paid professionals?

Yours faithfully,



Teresa Dobson
Chair Healthwatch Northamptonshire



Sandra Bell
Vice-Chair Healthwatch Northamptonshire