

## **Plymouth Plan for Libraries 2017**

### **Consultation response on behalf of Plymouth Community Homes:**

PCH is cognisant of the pressures on public service budgets, and the need for the City Council to find innovative ways of providing for its citizens, including in the Library Service. We are concerned, however about the potentially disproportionate effect that an offer weighted heavily towards online resources – and away from local library spaces - may have on those living in less-advantaged areas. We see local libraries providing a valuable place for adults seeking opportunities for self-development (including becoming job-ready) and learning within a community space. For children from homes with scarce resources to spend on books, local libraries are providing a valuable place to research, to study, and to complete homework in a quiet space, in addition to taking books home for personal reading. Both adults and children (and local schools) benefit from the personal assistance and suggestions that expert library staff are able to give to broaden library-users reading enjoyment - with the subsequent benefits that high levels of literacy and (self) education bring to the city.

With the above comments in mind, we request that those analysing PCH's response to the survey pay particular attention to the commentary we have given under each section. We felt that the survey questions on their own did not give sufficient opportunity to indicate meaningfully our position. In our view, the questions lack balance in that they do not indicate the potential downsides that may result if services are *replaced* by those set out in the documentation, as opposed to *supplementing* the current service.

### **Question 5 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to enhance our online service?**

Strongly disagree

Comment:

As technology advances it is essential that libraries evolve to include services such as borrowing e-books and audiobooks as well as having a 24/7 online transactional service.

However it is equally important to recognise that many people either do not wish to access these services online or they don't have the skills to be able to go online.

As well as recognising there could be barriers to accessing online services, our experience as an organisation providing community-based services is that many people prefer face-to-face contact – and an online library cannot replace human interaction.

“Going to the library” is often perceived as an “event” whereas the same could not be said for going online and borrowing an e-book. For many, visiting a library is a reason to go outside of the home and libraries are often considered to be a safe place where the services on offer are familiar. Libraries bring much more value to a person’s wellbeing than simply borrowing books.

**Question 6 – To what extent do you agree or disagree with our proposal to provide a library service based around reading, literacy, information and history, digital (getting online), health and wellbeing and learning?**

Strongly disagree.

In addition to reading, literacy, information and history, digital (getting online), health and wellbeing and learning the library service should also focus on helping people to connect with one another and bringing people together.

Libraries are somewhere where people can meet one another through a shared interest for example the Rhymetime / Storytime sessions for parents of young children are not just development opportunities for the child, they can also help adults to overcome loneliness and isolation.

Historically, literacy levels in Plymouth are low and it is essential that the library service continues to support reading and reading skills. It can be no coincidence that income levels are also low in some areas of the city, and so access to decent quality reading materials and support from specialist librarians is essential in these areas.

The children of today will be those who support the city economically in the future and it is vital that the Council continues to encourage their learning so that they have excellent changes of gaining meaningful employment in a thriving city when they are adults.

Information and history research has always been a function of libraries particularly with the reference section in Central Library and we would see no reason why this should not continue.

Getting people online is an objective that PCH shares with the Council and where the Council can increase free IT provision in the City can only be beneficial.

Health and wellbeing is another key theme for PCH and we operate in many neighbourhoods where residents have poor health and/or health inequalities. We would welcome extended provision into the health and wellbeing agenda however this could only work with the support of the NHS and Public Health as well as targeted communications activity to encourage take-up because this would not ordinarily be a service provided through libraries.

**Question 7 – to what extent do you agree or disagree with our proposal to deliver more services and activities in the community?**

7a –

Strongly Disagree.

Whilst there are some areas of the city that have no current library provision and an outreach service could be of great benefit to these communities, we would like to highlight our concerns regarding how members of the public will access this service. In the consultation literature, there is mention of a “Click and Collect Service” – with the emphasis on “Click” which implies accessing the service initially online.

It is worth remembering that not everyone is able to access online services and there would need to be other ways to access the outreach service.

However, we would be supportive of the library using existing community facilities to host group activities and learning opportunities. We consider libraries to have an essential role in bringing people together and it is vital that this role continues and is rolled out further across Plymouth.

In order to encourage continued learning and development amongst children and increased footfall in the libraries more generally the library service could consider running sessions such as homework clubs where children are supported and coached to research and understand the topics they are studying at school. There are many bright children living in low-income households, where the cost of tutoring / coaching routinely procured by better-off families prior to taking the entry examination for access to Plymouth’s grammar school is prohibitive – libraries could assist with preparation for tests and examinations, furthering PCC’s ability to facilitate equality of access to education.

7b – For Tothill Library Book Club – the St Judes Community Church Hub has approached PCH and they would like us to suggest (on their behalf) that the book club meets there instead if the library were to close.

Additionally, we have a building called the SPACE Centre in Ernesettle which we are in the process of handing over to a local group. Potentially, this could be considered as a venue for local activities. We understand PCC is liaising with the group directly, and we are also in contact with PCC, about potential availability and cost.

**Question 8 – to what extent do you agree or disagree that these are the right library buildings to remain open and provide our proposed full in-library service?**

We strongly disagree that only these buildings should remain open – in particular we believe that North Prospect library and those located adjacent to social housing should remain open for the reasons outlined in the next question.

**Question 9 – to what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to close these libraries?**

Strongly disagree.

We are especially disappointed that North Prospect Library and those located adjacent to social housing are being considered for closure.

This library opened three years ago as part of the regeneration of North Prospect and the Beacon Community Hub, where the library is based, was co-designed between PCH, local residents and Plymouth City Council. One of the outcomes of this process was the inclusion of space specifically designed to house a library. Furthermore, this building is leased to the Council on a long term rent-free lease with only service charges payable.

The regeneration in North Prospect is ongoing until at least 2022 and as such the neighbourhood is not yet fully populated.

Already we have seen better outcomes for the residents of North Prospect, even though the regeneration programme is not complete. The most recent Indices of Multiple Deprivation published in 2015 showed a clear reduction in deprivation in the neighbourhood. The library will have played a part in achieving this success.

We note from your factsheets, that the estimated footfall is over 25,000 visits per year and that there are 2,118 active users in the catchment for this library. We could only expect an increase in both statistics as the regeneration concludes and the population increases.

Again referring to the factsheet, the number of active users within the catchment for North Prospect library is higher than the number of active users for Crownhill, Southway, St Budeaux and Devonport libraries – and yet these are scheduled to remain open. Indeed Devonport Library is also more expensive on a cost per user basis, yet is not on the closure list, so can we have a clear explanation as to why North Prospect library has been singled out?

We would also like to point out that the cost of closure figures generally would benefit from more in-depth analysis. For example in North Prospect and Ernesettle there would be dilapidation costs, legal and other fees to pay on behalf of the PCH in order to relinquish the lease and plus your own staffing costs involved in vacating the building.

We note that one of the cited reasons why North Prospect library is earmarked for closure is that there is insufficient space for a “full digital provision”. There could be an area available within The Beacon for this purpose and we are open to a discussion about this (and indeed have written separately to Faye Batchelor-Hambleton about this).

We note that your “offer” includes spaces for 12 public access PCs in every library. Our buildings have a digital area for customers, and our experience is that people often prefer to bring their own device and simply use the Wi-Fi to do what they need

to rather than log onto a PC specifically provided by us and so 12 may not be required.

There are currently 5 PCs already in North Prospect library. In a deprived area, 5 PCs with public access is better than none, which would be the case if the library closes.

**Question 11 – Overall, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the Plan for Libraries proposal?**

We strongly disagree with the proposals.

Whilst we are supportive of a further roll-out of some library services into the community, we consider that this will be at the expense of other communities where their library is closing. We would welcome sight of the detail surrounding the Council's intentions around an outreach service in terms of services to be delivered by the Council and those expected to be delivered by partners and / or other organisations.

**Question 11 - Community Led Libraries**

**In some areas of the country, libraries are being run by volunteers, community groups and organisations.**

**Is this something you would be willing to consider and would like to know more about?**

For clarity, Plymouth Community Homes would not be in a position to take over the running of any libraries in Plymouth.

We suggest that, if necessary, the Council considers contracting out the library service to a suitable social enterprise or set up an arms-length company similar to how school catering was contracted to CaterED.

**Question 12 – Finally please tell us if you have any alternative ideas about how we can protect the future of Plymouth's library service.**

The Council should promote libraries more, especially with an enhanced level of service, so a targeted marketing campaign could help increase footfall and therefore value for money. Encourage children to use libraries more through school outreach so that future visitor numbers are protected.

The Council could host workshops for the general public for a small fee such as researching family history, with the funds raised used to run clubs and events for individuals and families with lower-incomes.

We are also aware of plans for the Council and Public Health to set up “Health and Wellbeing Hubs” yet there is no mention of these in the Plan for Libraries, are the libraries already being considered as host venues for the hubs as we understand to be the case?