

Plan for Libraries

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You will not be surprised to learn that this issue has caused a lot of comment among members both as staff and users and I feel I need to pass some of these comments on. I would like to state that I have visited most of the libraries in Plymouth and talked to many members of staff, some of which were union members and some of whom were not. There are quite a few agency staff which explains why the employer is able to suggest that compulsorily redundancies are not on the cards and they wanted to be heard too. The subject has also been discussed at UNISON meetings and I have canvassed opinion from members informally so these are not simply my own views.

Unison is very concerned with the scale of the library closures proposed. There has clearly from reading the proposal been some good work done around making the library service relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century by offering new services online, longer opening hours for remaining buildings and using pop ups to reach areas that we currently do not (or will leave). Some members were also prepared to accept that one or two of the smallest venues were just too limited and are already on quite short opening hours. However many felt that there were some very good facilities such as the ones in North Prospect, West Park, Estover and Efford that were built for purpose are being wastefully abandoned. Other well used venues such as Peverell and Stoke are not perfect but there was a parallel view that problems were being created by an arbitrary standard being imposed on things like numbers of PCs. There is no great advantage in standardisation across the service and the public can cope with some variable opening times or the absence of a meeting room.

In particular I would like to draw attention to how little members were worried for themselves and how much of their concerns were for the service. Many were concerned that children would have nowhere safe to go after school, particularly those of an age where they could start to go places without their parents. Others worried about unemployed people completing job searches and elderly people suffering from social isolation. The plan is good in terms of service delivery but seems to miss the community value of a library. Most of those mentioned above are located in a local shopping centre the future viability of which would be undermined by the loss of a public facility like this. Some of these like Ernesettle could become quite isolated as a community and nearly all are economically vulnerable. Many of these locations are assets to the Customer Services Team and if anything there is room for more imagination in how they could be used to help the people of Plymouth access Council services without having to use the overstretched call centre or New George St.

Finally I think that there is an over reliance on online solutions. Many of our service users do not find this easy or have no access at all to the internet at home. Librarians can open the door to some of these but only if they are locally situated. I also received feedback that people coming in to give negative feedback were being pushed towards the online consultation which raises the question whether objections are being suppressed and indicating that making things online only is even now being used as a way of restricting demand.