

Proposed Library Service Strategy – Outcome of Engagement

The purpose of this document is to set out the engagement with staff, Trade Unions and Departmental Representatives since the Renewal & Recreation Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee on 18th March 2015 decided that officers should progress the implementation of the strategy's second ambition, to commission the library service. This included entering into discussions with the London Borough of Bexley to develop a joint procurement strategy, undertaking soft market testing and completing further consultation with library staff, library users and residents.

There have been several letters sent to staff, Trade Unions and Departmental Representatives to update on the situation and 3 engagement meetings were arranged in September and October to inform staff of the main points contained in the Committee report. A separate meeting was arranged with the Trade Union and Departmental Representatives on 16th October. HR attended all these meetings to answer any questions relating to HR matters.

There were a number of questions and themes that came out of the staff discussions at these meetings and these are listed below:

- There was a comment that public consultation was biased

Management response: An independent specialist market research company was engaged to carry out the consultation. The consultation questions contained more detail about what a commissioned library service would mean for users as there was some criticism of the previous consultation that there was insufficient information to judge the merits of a commissioned service.

- Concerns were raised that the results of the self-completion survey and street survey were not presented as one whole figure.

Management Response: There are two separate methodologies for these surveys and to present them as one figure would undermine their statistical relevance. However, the report to be considered by Members will clearly identify the differences between the two surveys, including the number of respondents.

- It was raised that the Council has reserves and managers where asked why reserves are not being used to offset the significant savings that the Council has to find to balance the budget in the long term.

Management response: The Council have previously rejected this approach as it does not represent an economically sustainable strategy in the long-term.

- Concern was expressed about other transfers that have happened and could the Council guarantee no changes to terms and conditions. There were also some concerns raised about the level of qualified staff.

Management response: The circumstances affecting other transfers are different to those affecting proposals to commission the library service. The Council would not guarantee that terms and conditions would not change after transfer if this was to happen. It is anticipated that the specification will

require suitably qualified staff to be used by any organisation taking on the running of the library service.

- A question was asked about what would happen if the Council could not find anyone to run the Community Managed Libraries.

Management response: There could be different arrangements for each community library or groups of community libraries. It may be that community management arrangements can be found for none, some or all of the community libraries. The Council will make a decision about whether or not to agree community management arrangements in the New Year. Should no suitable community management arrangements be secured, one further option for Members to consider arising from the soft market testing is that the community libraries could be included in the contract for the direct management under the same conditions as the core libraries..

- Questions were asked about TUPE and pensions:

HR response: Until decisions are made about the future of libraries it is difficult to enter into discussions because we do not know what the proposals are as yet. The Council's managing change procedures will be followed should a decision be made to transfer staff and at this time the appropriate consultations with staff will take place.

- Staff were concerned about how maintenance liabilities for library buildings would be addressed within the contract

Management response: It is anticipated that library buildings will be leased to the successful contractor, should proposals go ahead. Responsibility for maintenance liabilities will be clearly identified.

- Staff were unsure of the message to give to customers about the future of the library service.

Management Response: When decisions are made a statement will be prepared so that staff are prepared to share this information with customers.

- There were concerns about how the contract would protect service levels and how it would be monitored if the service was commissioned.

Management response: The specification and contract terms will include monitoring mechanisms such as establishing service levels and key performance indicators, and will set penalties for non-performance, including financial penalties. There will be a client unit monitoring the service and ultimately any organisation undertaking this service would be accountable to Members; this will include being held to account at Committee meetings.