Request for Deputation

Name   Laura Anne MacKay

Committee   Communities, Housing and Public Protection Committee

Agenda Item   **11. 2 -** Aberdeen's Future Library and Information Service

The action I wish the Council/Committee to take

3.3 "Libraries are about people, the way the people in our city access the Library and Information service is changing with a reduction of physical visits and a considerable and steady increase in virtual visits."

Libraries are about people and the way people have access to local libraries across Aberdeen has changed due to multiple changes in opening hours and a reduction in access to community branches across the city. While more people are using and seeking digital resources, there is still digital poverty in our city meaning these resources cannot be accessed from every home either due to a lack of education, a lack of IT equipment, affordable internet, language barriers or disability. Libraries are also not all about accessing information and books, but also about learning, getting support to access information, and connecting with communities.

The table shows how library visits 'fell' and then have been gradually increasing. Total library visits do not reflect this within the context of the number of branches open, the total hours they are open for compared to how they once were before the COVID-19 pandemic closures. They also do not reflect the need in some areas, particularly where schools do not have a library and school librarian. An empty classroom with books on display is not the same as a staffed school library service. It should be noted that a school library has very limited access for communities, and that not all families educate their children through the schools.

There are many families in Aberdeen who use libraries as part of their child's home learning instead of registering them at school.

I would also hope that as housing developments are approved in areas around the city, amenities such as community centres and libraries that are accessible to people of all ages are within a safe walking distance from their homes. I have seen that Stirling Council have been increasing its branches, opening up new staffed community libraries.

Consideration needs to be taken to location – many people in Garthdee were unaware of their local library service due to it being based in Kaimhill School as well as it being closed for 2 years during the pandemic. Often libraries within school buildings prove to be a barrier to people in the community who do not have children who attend that particular school.

Lower library footfall or lack of engagement in the consultation in neighbourhoods where there is the greatest need to improve mental health, educational attainment, and child literacy levels should not be used as a reason to reduce or close a community library service, but as an indicator that more needs to be done to help people to feel safe and welcome to access the services that can benefit them.

3.6 "Engagement will be designed mindful of access barriers. There will be opportunities designed for children and young people, more anonymous consultation in libraries and online, and invites to join themed focus groups as well as bringing in expertise from across our national library networks. We must capture the voice of library customers as well as capturing input from those who don't currently access the library service or have yet to access services."

An important factor is to do consultation with communities who have lost their libraries. The closure of the Linksfield Library is still felt by people in Linksfield and Seaton, and we know that many library users in Rosehill & Stockethill, Woodside, Hilton, Garthdee, Ferryhill & Broomhill, Northfield & Heathryfold and Cults had felt the loss of access and now total closure of their libraries. While some have been able to drive to other libraries that are open later and have car parking, others who do not drive have lost that same access they once had. We also would hope that consultation is undertaken by someone independent of the council and that the Council speak with experts at such as those at Scottish Library and Information Council, CILIP Scotland, Scottish Book Trust, Society of Childrens Book Writers and Illustrators British Isles Scotland branch, care and residential homes, the VSA, community frontline NHS staff, disability charities, Community Councils, teachers, librarians, and the Save Aberdeen Libraries campaign group.

I would also recommend that the timeline be changed as many groups and communities will not be meeting over the summer, and to allow community programmes to settle back in so they don't miss the opportunity to take part in the consultation.

You have put that the risk factors are low, and yet the council is already having to waste thousands of taxpayer's money to battle petitions in the court of session currently due to lack of consultation and properly equalities impact evaluations as recently as four months ago.

Action to be taken:

Average hourly footfall (calculated by taking into consideration the weekly opening hours of each library) should be calculated for all library branches that were open before and after pandemic. Changes to hours/access level should be noted so councillors can take the impact of this on users. Please find attached my own analysis comparing pre-pandemic to 2022/23 opening hours and footfall as an example. This data has been sourced through Aberdeen City Council via a Freedom of Information request.

Look at PC usage in libraries in context of their opening hours as an indicator to digital access needed in those communities that cannot be found at home.

Consultation in communities that have had reduced access to their local libraries (both through closure and reduced opening hours), in particular regard to people in protected characteristics living close to these branches.

Cornhill, Cults, Ferryhill, Kaimhill, Northfield & Woodside libraries to be considered in consultation.

Consider changing the timeline of this consultation, to give time for community groups to get involved, in particular student communities (Save Aberdeen Libraries heard that Ferryhill Library in particular was used by students as it was easier to get to this library than to their university one).

Consider hiring independent consultant to run the review of library services.

A map to be shown of schools that currently have school libraries staffed by a school librarian, schools with an unstaffed makeshift library,and schools without any dedicated library space at all. This map should also indicate where there are sheltered housing complexes, residential homes, nurseries, community centres, and the SIMD index to show where there is additional need.

Request funding that was promised for public libraries by the Scottish Government to help reach goals for the national library and digital strategies mentioned.

Research additional trusts and foundation funding that may be found to help improve buildings, services and increase activities on offer in our libraries.

Please note that in submitting a deputation your name will be placed in the public domain and recorded in the minute.

Return by email to committeeservices@aberdeencity.gov.uk