

FUTURE HIGH STREET FUND - MERSEYWAY

Report of the Deputy Chief Executive, Place and Deputy Chief Executive, Corporate and Support Services

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide an update on phase one of the engagement and consultation process approved by Cabinet in June 2021 in the Future High Street Fund – Merseyway report.
- 1.2 To set out the next phase of work in the engagement and consultation process and share the draft consultation materials set out in Appendix Three.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In June 2021, the Cabinet approved the strategy set out in the Future High Streets – Merseyway report for the delivery of the Future High Street Fund bid and more specifically the Stockroom element of this.
- 2.2 The approval delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive (Place) and Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate and Support Services) in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Citizen Focus and Engagement and the Cabinet Member for Economy and Regeneration and the Strategic Head Service (Legal and Democratic Governance) the authority to take the necessary steps to implement the strategy set out in this report.
- 2.3 The extraordinary meeting was requested by the members of Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee at the meeting of its members on 17th June 2021 and follows on from the extraordinary meeting on 30th June 2021.

3. PHASE ONE – ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

- 3.1 The Cabinet report set out a detailed engagement and consultation process which included a first phase of engagement to establish what the public would like to see in the Stockroom element of the Future High Streets fund scheme and if there was support for a 21st Century Library offer following the first phase of the engagement, the process for a phase two of consultation relating to the relocation of Library services from the existing Central Library Building.
- 3.2 The first phase of the engagement ran for four weeks from 5th July to 1st August and was promoted extensively through the Council's and partner networks, through social media and through communicating with our partners and communities through mail-outs and displays in public buildings across the Borough. A summary of the promotion done to encourage involvement is included below.

3.3 The promotional materials for the engagement has reached:

- Over 10,000 Social Media users
 - Through SMBC posts and FB advertising
- Over 25,000 members of SMBC and partner mailing lists
- Over 150 board or forum members
- Over 300 businesses in the town
- Users of public building and libraries in the Borough
- Face-to-face engagement with visitors to Merseyway, Redrock and the Market Place (Foodie Friday) on consecutive weekends in July.

3.4 Additional feedback was also received from partner organisations, forums and other engagement meetings and this has been collated by QA Research, independent specialists in engagement, consultation and evaluation in their report on the phase one engagement included within Appendix One.

3.5 The Stockroom survey website was the main vehicle to receive the public feedback and this received 5,800 visits and 1,299 responses to the survey were logged. As set out in the QA report, this represents a sample size considerably within the +/-5% standard industry error rate required to provide a statistically robust results at an overall level.

3.6 A summary of the responses received is given in the sections below and the QA report in Appendix One.

4. SURVEY RESPONSES - OVERVIEW

4.1 The engagement survey asked what people would like to see in the various zones of Stockroom – Discovery, Community, Learning and Family - with a number of suggested uses and a free text question on other uses which might fit into these zones. The original survey has been included for information in Appendix Two of this report.

4.2 The most and least popular uses for Stockroom are indicated below as both the number of people who felt the use would be a benefit and as a percentage of the people who answered the question:

Most popular:

Use	Zone	Number of people who felt the use was beneficial	% of people who felt use was beneficial
Chance to enrol in a class or support group	Learning	965	80%
Relaxing in comfy seating in a modern café environment	Family	937	79%

Free access to computers, Wi-Fi, support to get you online and use a range of free digital resources	Learning	934	78%
Having access to facilities such as toilets which are accessible for all and buggy/mobility scooter hire	Community	911	75%
Accessing a range of help and advice services when you need support	Community	875	72%
Connecting with other people and groups in your community in a modern, flexible space	Community	857	70%
Discovering Music, Theatre, Poetry, Story-telling, Talent Shows and more	Discovery	854	70%

Least popular:

Use	Zone	Number of people who felt the use was beneficial	% of people who felt use was beneficial
Opportunity to host a party, business event, wedding or other celebration	Community	423	35%
Help to trace your family tree	Discovery	436	36%
Chance to register life events like births and marriages and access other council and community services	Community	543	45%

All other uses were felt to be beneficial by more than 50% of people who answered the question.

- 4.3 The full set of results of these results are included in the QA report in Appendix One.
- 4.4 In addition to the uses set out in the questions relating to the four zones, each zone included a free text section for 'other' suggested uses.
- 4.5 The table below shows a selection of the suggestions made for each zone. Many of these suggestions are of course relevant to more than one zone and further work is being done to group the suggested uses into more detailed categories:

Discovery Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebration of Stockport, multicultural heritage and diversity • Gallery and exhibition space • Tourist attractions and tourist information • Small science lab with fume hood for science demonstrations and workshops - getting young girls into physics and maths at an early age • Flexible studio space for skills sharing. • FabLab style access to technologies such as
-----------------------	---

	coding, 3d printing, laser cutting. Etc
Community Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space for community groups and ability to find volunteering opportunities • Information and education on Stockport initiatives to address Climate Change • Disability inclusive facilities • Encouraging/empowering people to become better at managing their own health • Free mortgage, pension advice and citizens advice • Facilities for young people and older children • Facilities for older people • Help with mental health and wellbeing • Local market selling clothes,etc by local people BUT not expensive
Learning Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great space for music lessons and performances • Crafting facilities for children and adults. • Interactive stuff always great for energetic children, a play shop, garage or post office (like Eureka), or perhaps something where you pedal a bike that lights something up (they have the fun of learning about power and environment while doing). • A homework help club: A learning centre where children between the ages of 5-19 between a certain time (eg. 2pm-7pm) can go and ask for support
Family Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops for children in the holidays • Events aimed at children who aren't in school and can be held during term time. Lots of little children miss out on interaction with other because parents can't afford to take them places. • Dedicated breastfeeding space/ support • Help and advice with parenting, family issues, school problems

4.6 Question 6 of the survey asked people to consider what they saw as the benefits of a development of this nature for the Town Centre. A number of suggestions were provided and again there was space for free comment to indicate 'other' benefits. The table below indicates the responses to those suggested benefits:

Breathing life back into empty retail	83% - 992 people
Having community facilities in an accessible and central location	70% - 833 people
Creation of jobs	63% - 745 people
Better access to digital services and technology	60% - 714 people

Stronger sense of community spirit	57% - 681 people
Improved reading and literacy skills	53% - 629 people
Other	11% - 135 people

- 4.7 Additional suggested benefits were received and a selection is provided below:
- Would give Stockport a better reputation. Put it back on the map. Draw people in to the centre.
 - A place to go where there is no expectation to spend money
 - Could help to develop a genuine sense of community
 - Investing in and having faith in Stockport as a culturally and community focussed town to give residents pride
 - Somewhere for younger people to go, access to the latest technology
 - Boost the economy!
- 4.8 Question 7 asked people to consider what they saw as the potential disadvantages of a development of this nature for the Town Centre. No potential examples were provided and the responses were free comment only. This question in the survey provided the primary means for people to express their opposition to the proposal for Stockroom.
- 4.9 Of the 1,299 people who responded to the survey, 770 people answered this question. 23% of people (178 people) responding to this question answered that they felt there would be no disadvantages or provided a positive comments. 20% of people (156) felt most or all resources would be taken away from Central Library with a further 4% (33) expressing concern that the Central Library building would be sold or demolished and 3% (22) expressing concern regarding the uncertainty of its future. 16% of people (122) felt that it was taking away from local amenities or services. All other responses in this sections were less than 8% of those people who responded.
- 4.10 The broad nature of other disadvantages of the proposal raised in the survey included:
- Concerns around the accessibility of Stockroom
 - Concerns around the attractiveness of Merseyway
 - Concerns around Stockroom attracting anti-social behaviour
 - Concerns around locating too many services in one place
- 4.11 In addition to the survey, a number of stakeholder engagement presentations were made to organisations and groups and the details of these groups are set out in the appendix to the QA report in Appendix One. These have been summarised in the qualitative feedback sections.
- 4.12 The responses received from the stakeholder engagements were very positive with support expressed for the Stockroom concept. Groups liked the central location for a range of services and offers, particularly with a community focus. The opportunity to provide learning as well as a place to socialise was also welcomed by the

groups. Many confirmed that they would like to be involved further in the design of the space.

- 4.13 On the perceived disadvantages of the proposals, there was an absence of any criticism of the proposed plans but one group raised questions in relation to any library service in Stockroom where they would like to see an improved offer over the current offer in Central Library. Another enquired about the future of the existing Central Library Building.

5. CONCLUSIONS FROM PHASE ONE

- 5.1 From the results of the engagement exercise, there is considerable positivity towards the Stockroom project and the breadth of suggested uses for inclusion in Stockroom demonstrates real enthusiasm for the concept and the wider benefits it will bring.
- 5.2 There is clear support for attempts to repurpose vacant retail units in Merseyway. Many people believe Merseyway continues to suffer from a poor perception and 83% of people who responded felt that the proposal would breathe life back into empty retail space. 70% expressed the benefit of having community facilities in an accessible/central location.
- 5.3 A number of the uses which were included in the four zones or were suggested by the public can be classified as those which would be expected in a 21st Century library offer within Stockroom. All of this have received positive support.
- 5.4 Concerns about the provision of the town centre library service and the Central Library Building specifically have been raised through the survey and can be categorised into three themes;
- Those where assumptions have been made that the Central Library building will be demolished or sold off.
 - Those where concern is expressed over the future of the building and which ask a question about what the Council's plans will be for the building.
 - Those opposed to moving all or part of the current library offer from the Central Library building.

However these responses represent a minority of the overall responses in the engagement process.

- 5.5 The Cabinet decision in June 2021 stated:

"If there is support to include a 21st Century library offer within Stockroom, then the second phase would be a formal consultation on the relocation of library services from the existing Central Library Building on the A6. This would also include the potential plans for alternative uses for the building. This is in line with Page 81 the Council resolution made in October 2020 that library services would not be removed from Stockport Central Library building unless and until

there has been a proper public consultation that makes this intention clear and sets out the alternative plans for the building so that Stockport residents can have their say.”

- 5.6 Given the support for Stockroom received through phase one of the engagement process, it is therefore the intention to proceed with the formal consultation on the relocation of library services from the existing Central Library Building.

6. THE CENTRAL LIBRARY BUILDING

- 6.1 The Council has made a commitment about the future of the building which will hopefully address some of the confusion about the loss of the physical building to the people of Stockport and allay some of the concerns raised regarding its future use.
- 6.2 The proposals for Stockroom are about improving the life chances of the people of Stockport by increasing the size of the library offer and cultural services, not reducing them. For example, Stockroom offers the opportunity to display the full library collection of c.21,000 books whereas the size of the Central Library Building only allows the display of approximately half of the collection.
- 6.3 The Council has committed not to demolish or abandon the building. It is a Listed building and is a much loved and important part of our town’s heritage which the Council wish to preserve.
- 6.4 The Council will not sell the freehold of the Central Library building – even if the decision is made to move library services into the new facilities funded by the Future High Streets Fund.
- 6.5 The Council will not redevelop the Central Library buildings for flats or any residential use that would mean the public losing access to this heritage asset. It is important that any future uses ensure that public access is retained to the building for the long-term, so future generations can appreciate it.
- 6.6 During the phase one engagement, the Council was presented with a petition which asked the Council to ‘Drop the proposal to close and replace the Central Library with a much reduced library service located in the Merseyway retail precinct’. The petition organisers will be receiving a formal response to this from the Council.
- 6.7 However as set out in 6.2 above, the Stockroom proposal will increase the size of the library offer rather than reduce it.
- 6.8 A number of questions were raised during the phase engagement about why money could not be spent on the Central Library building to improve the library.
- 6.9 The purpose of the government’s Future High Street Fund is to renew and reshape town centres and high streets in a way that improves experience, drives growth and ensures future sustainability. The Council’s successful submission was focussed on Merseyway as this is Stockport’s main High Street and as such was eligible for the

funding whereas as the location of the Central Library Building means that it is not. As such the funding is not available through this bid.

- 6.10 Questions have also been raised regarding the redevelopment of the Central Library Building as a 21st Century library without the assistance of external funding. The costs of this would be prohibitive as explained below.
- 6.11 Local Authorities across the country are coming to terms with the financial impact of the pandemic and Stockport is not alone in facing financial pressures that have brought on by the pandemic. Therefore it is not possible for the Council to use its reserves to fund a major redevelopment of the Central Library Building, and at present there are no external funding streams available for the level of capital investment the building would require.
- 6.12 There has been some suggestion that the Arts Council Libraries Improvement Fund could be used for the upgrade of Central Library Building. This fund that only has £5m in total to award nationally with a maximum award to any local authority of £499,999. As can be seen from the information below, even if successful this would cover less than 10% of the capital cost required.
- 6.13 It has been estimated that the cost of essential maintenance over a five year period is approximately £760,000. In addition, a preliminary structural inspection has listed over 100 defects that require remediation with 20 of these stated to be of a high priority. The cost of these structural repairs is as yet uncertain but is thought to be in the region £2-2.5m.
- 6.14 Essential maintenance and structural repairs would need to be completed before any upgrade to the library provision could be considered. It is estimated that the cost to provide a high quality fit out of the building, suitable to accommodate a 21st Century library offer, would be approximately a further £4.4m. This would not include the cost of obtaining consents and making any structural alterations required to the fabric of this listed asset, which are likely to be significant.
- 6.15 In addition this would provide an offer which would only be 25% to 35% of the size of the offer proposed in Stockroom.

7. PHASE TWO – FORMAL LIBRARY CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The report approved by Cabinet in June 2021 set out a timetable for formal consultation that would enable a decision to be made on the final proposal and business case for Stockroom by the Cabinet in December 2021.
- 7.2 The proposed timescale for formal consultation on the proposal to move library services into Stockroom is set out below:
- Consultation (phase 2) Start 23rd August 2021 (for 8 weeks)
 - Consultation (Phase 2) End 15th October 2021

This is a week later than set out in the June 2021 to allow the proper time for analysis of the phase one engagement and for the Extraordinary Scrutiny

Committee to consider this along with the proposed materials for the phase two Consultation.

- 7.3 The draft consultation materials are included in Appendix Three of this report. It should be noted that these still require some further design work before formal sign-off by the Cabinet Member. Opinion will be gauged during phase two using a questionnaire that will be available on the Council's 'Citizen Space' portal and in paper form through libraries and public buildings throughout the Borough. As with the phase one engagement, views will also be sought from a range of community groups and partners as part of this consultation.
- 7.4 In line with the Cabinet decision, the consultation will reiterate the potential uses for the Central Library Building but also seek views from the public about alternative uses that they would like to see in the building if library services were relocated to Stockroom.
- 7.5 Work will continue with CBRE on potential alternative uses taking into account the views expressed by the public through the consultation and as stated previously, this will be concluded in line with the final business case on Stockroom for a decision by Cabinet in December 2021.
- 7.6 It should be noted that even if through the engagement consultation process it is recommended that the library service should be relocated to Stockroom, the Central Library Building would remain as a library until at least May 2023 during which time more detailed plans could be worked up for its use beyond that date.
- 7.7 The third and final phase of engagement is dependent on the outcome of the first two phases but would look to re-engage with stakeholders and residents to get views on the final proposals for Stockroom in advance of the Cabinet report on the final scheme on 7th December 2021. It is anticipated that that report would go to the following Committees:
- Corporate Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny – 23rd November 2021
 - Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny – 25th November 2021
 - Cabinet – 7th December 2021

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 The meeting is asked to note the update on phase one of the engagement and consultation process approved by Cabinet in June 2021 in the Future High Street Fund – Merseyway report.
- 8.2 The meeting is also asked to note the next phase of work in the engagement and consultation process and the proposed consultation materials set out in Appendix Three.