COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF AREA AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF MEMBERS OF THE CENTRAL STOCKPORT AREA COMMITTEE
17 November 2021

Agenda Item 3. Open Forum - Stockport United Against Austerity

In accordance with paragraph 2(b) of the Code of Practice on Area Committee and Ward Committee - Open Forums, representatives of the Save Stockport's Historic Central Library campaign (John Pearson, Deborah Hind and Phillip Welldrake), which was organised by Stockport United Against Austerity, addressed the Area Committee regarding Stockport's Future High Street Fund project, Stockroom, the proposed transfer of library services from the Central Library building to Stockroom and the recent consultation which had been undertaken.

The following comments were made/issues raised by the representatives of Stockport United Against Austerity:-

- The creation of public libraries in the country offered more than just the books and other materials in their buildings. They were welcoming places to be and were, for example, especially beneficial to elderly people. They were a social entitlement.
- There were a lot of benefits to having a purpose built central library as a public, civic building. The Central Library building was a Grade 2 Listed Building which was of local and national architectural importance.
- The Central Library building could be adapted and form part of a Civic Quarter with the Town Hall nearby. There had been an impressive refurbishment of Central Library buildings in other parts of the country. The Central Library was also accessible in terms of its proximity to the railway station, the new Stockport Interchange and a bus stop for the 192 bus service.
- The Stockport Heritage Trust had suggested having the entrance to the Central Library at the rear of the building and this was an option which could be considered.
- The Merseyway Precinct had been designed for shops. Stockport United Against Austerity felt that the proposals had materialised because of the Council's concerns about the number of empty retail units in the Merseyway Precinct.
- The majority of people who had responded to the consultation were opposed to the transfer of library services from the Central Library building to Stockroom. This reflected the petition organised by Stockport United Against Austerity which had been signed by in excess of 7,000 people opposed to the transfer.
- People had found the phased nature of the engagement and consultation process difficult to understand.
- Despite the Council's undertaking to return library services to the Central Library building once the Covid-19 pandemic permitted, many of the library services had not been returned to the Central Library building and were still in the One Stockport Hub building in the former Argos Store in the Merseyway Precinct.
- The needs of the library service for older people and disabled people had not been properly represented in the report.
- There wouldn't be full public access to the Central Library building if library services weren't provided there.

- Stockport United Against Austerity referred to a report from CIPFA which indicated that the Council had a comparatively low level of funds accessed to support library services.
- There had been a reduction in the opening hours of libraries in Stockport and an increase in the number of hours where the libraries were unstaffed. The latter had caused possible security concerns.
- Merseyway Precinct was not part of the Council's civic estate and there would be a payment to facilities management if the library service was in Stockroom.

The following comments were made/issues raised by Members of the Area Committee:-

- The Council's proposals were about taking the social entitlement identified by Stockport United Against Austerity and ensuring that it was built upon for the future. The Council's aim was to maintain library services at a time when there was a decline in people using the service.
- The library service was vulnerable in its current location and change was required to preserve the service.
- Stockport's library service was valued and this would continue irrespective of which building it was in. A distinction needed to be made between the services provided and the building they were provided in.
- Comparisons with the refurbishment of other central libraries were not realistic. With regard to the refurbishment of Kendal Library, the population of Kendal was about 12,000 and the population of Stockport was about 234,600.
- The Central Library was restricted by its floorspace which was 12,000 square feet. Only 6% of books could be displayed at any one time.
- Stockroom offered a significantly larger area with a floorspace of 43,000 square feet with enough space for a performance area, an events area, a sensory room and enhanced toilet provision. All these facilities could be accessed by people who used the library.
- The Stockroom proposal contained enhanced provision for children.
- No libraries had closed in the borough since the Government austerity measures introduced in 2010. This contrasted with other areas such as Bury where a significant proportion of local libraries had been closed.
- Stockroom would allow those who lived in the vicinity of the town centre to have new facilities in their own neighbourhood.

RESOLVED – That the presentations by the representatives of Stockport United Against Austerity be noted.

Agenda Item 4. Future High Street Fund - Stockroom

Consideration was given to a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on progress with Stockport's High Street Fund project, Stockroom, and updating Members on the recent consultation which had been undertaken.

The Cabinet Members for Citizen Focus & Engagement (Councillor David Sedgwick) and Economy & Regeneration (Councillor David Meller) attended the meeting to respond to questions from the Area Committee.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- There had been a decline in the usage of the Central Library over the last ten years and attempts had been made to turn this around.

- Libraries should also be aimed at young children, not all of whom were academic and who had different ways of working.
- Young people were now growing up with technology and there had to be new and innovative learning environments for young people.
- The library building needed to be fit for purpose to enable the service to be inclusive.
- Libraries should be open to all people, including asylum seekers.
- The proposed component parts of Stockroom, as set out in paragraph 5.6 of the report, were to be commended.
- Stockport need a first class library service that was free and open to all. Since the Central Library was built in Stockport, another sixteen libraries had been built in the borough. Stockport was a different place to the one that existed when Central Library was built and if was being built today it would be built in a different location in the town centre.
- The Council should not ignore the opportunity afforded by the successful Future High Street Fund bid.
- It was possible to respect Stockport's heritage and see the opportunities presented by Stockroom as the way forward for Stockport. The Council had given a firm commitment that the historic Central Library building would be preserved.
- Studies had shown that when libraries were included in shopping precincts, their usage increased.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

Corporate, Resource Management and Governance Scrutiny Committee
23 November 2021

Agenda Item 11. Future High Street Fund – Stockroom

Consideration was given to a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on progress with Stockport's High Street Fund project, Stockroom, and updating Members on the recent consultation which had been undertaken.

The Cabinet Member for Citizen Focus and Engagement (Councillor David Sedgwick) and Nick How from Qa Research attended the meeting to respond to questions from the Scrutiny Committee.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- Some Members felt that the Scrutiny Committee should oppose the closure of library services at Central Library as this was the view of the majority of the people who had responded to the consultation. They were not opposed to the principle of developing Stockroom, but considered that the Council needed to look again at which services were provided at Central Library and which at Stockroom.
- The Scrutiny Committee needed to distinguish between the building and the service. It was not possible to provide a twenty first century library in a building that had been built in the early part of the twentieth century.
- The need for people to regularly visit the reference library had been overtaken by technological advancements such as the development of tablets and mobile phones. Stockroom offered the opportunity to develop alternative uses for the library.
- Reference was made to the differences in the consultation responses between those which were on-line and those which were face-to-face with a majority of residents who completed the online self completion questionnaire disagreeing with the proposal to move library services from Central Library to Stockroom.
- Concern was expressed that respondents had not been advised of the possible alternative uses for the Central Library at the time of the consultation.
- Stockroom would give people more reason to come into the town centre at a time when there had been a decline in the number of retail units.

It was then

RESOLVED – (5 for, 4 against) That the Cabinet be recommended to not proceed with the relocation of library services from Central Library.

CHILDREN & FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
24 November 2021

Agenda Item 7. Future High Street Fund – Stockroom

The Corporate Director (Place) and Deputy Chief Executive, and Corporate Director (Corporate and Support Services) and Deputy Chief Executive submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on progress with Stockport's Future High Street Fund project, Stockroom.

The Cabinet Member for Children, Family Services and Education (Councillor Colin Foster) attended the meeting to respond to questions from the Scrutiny Committee.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- Sustaining Stockroom in the long term was a concern and what would happen to the library if Stockroom failed. In response, it was noted that a lot of work had gone into Stockroom as a concept and similar projects around the northwest that were successful were researched e.g. Bracknall, Barnsley, Rochdale, Manchester Library and Chester and the footfall had increased.
- There were currently a number of empty retail units in Stockport, but what the borough needed was a flagship superstore to attract people to Stockport to spend money. In response, it was commented that if there were superstores that were looking for a site, contact would have been made already, however, a number of superstores/chains around the country were closing on the high streets as it was an outdated concept with more and more people shopping online.
- The existing and proposed developments in Stockport Town Centre relating to Stockroom, Next, M&S Employment Unit, Mersey Innovation Centre, Leisure facilities at Redrock and the relocation of Stepping Hill Hospital would impact the smaller units and decrease footfall which could potentially close these units.
- It was noted that there would be an increase in footfall with these existing and new proposed developments which could have the opposite effect increase footfall and the demand for more units.
- Clarification was sought relating to £14.5m fund from Government and the cost to taxpayers in Stockport for the Stockroom development. In response, it was stated that the capital costs would be £400,000, with the revenue costs being cost neutral, with some modest income generation.
- It was commented that the children's promise sets out that 'public libraries would welcome children from the very earliest months, helping parents and carers to support their child as they grow'.
- Information was sought relating to the consultation and what the views were of the young people that were engaged. In response, it was noted that 82% of young people who completed the survey were between the ages of 15-17 years old, with 65% who thought it was a good idea, 31% were unsure, 4% thought it was a bad idea and 37% who said it would make them more likely to use the library if it was moved.
- A number of focus groups were conducted involving parents with school aged children, people with disabilities, older people, younger people, members of the library staff, the Youth Council and the Leaving Care Group.
- Sensory issues were increasing in young children and the first 1,001 days to 5 years old were important to a young child and given that there were no 'sensory rooms' in Stockport with the nearest one being in Wythenshawe and a lack of changing rooms with

a hoist. It was noted that the proposed ‘sensory room’ in Stockroom would be the only one in the borough with the changing facilities being accessible for all.

- Members enquired about the use of the purpose built classrooms in the Stockport Museum that were designed for young people. In response, it was stated that a written response would be provided to the Committee.
- Members welcomed some of the good initiatives that were planned for Stockroom as part of the proposals for the children and young people in the Borough.
- Members enquired about Stockroom and the provisions for young people to be in a quiet and calm space for those who may want to study with all the proposed activities including cafes, office space, a wedding venue and the impact this would have on other businesses locally. In response, it was noted that Stockroom was a substantial size similar to that of a football pitch with different floors identified for different purposes including quiet spaces for young people, autism friendly spaces, meeting rooms, café space, with the design supporting the lack of sound moving around the venue.
- It was noted that regarding the impact on other businesses, a consultant was being used to look at the space and the impact on other businesses.
- Was there any confusion relating to the consultation and objections in the petition regarding what was being asked. In response, it was stated that the consultation carried out was to understand the impact on the proposals and consider the mitigation of anything negative. A number of methods were used including online and face to face surveys and focus groups as set out in the report.
- It was noted that the Council did receive a number of petitions that had already been formally responded to and sought to clarify with the petitioners that the proposals were note for a reduced library service but rather for an enhanced library service.
- Buildings were important including the traditional ones and take into account the current Central Library where young people feel safe, secure and peaceful primarily for books with a librarian. As part of the proposals why not modernise the library similar to Manchester Library and then move all the other services that were needed into Stockroom.
- The proposal would be massive for Stockport and it would be important to listen and take the public on the journey even if it means tweaking the plans along the way to respond to the views of the public.

RESOLVED – (1) (5 for, 4 against) That the Cabinet be recommended to not proceed with the relocation of library services from Central Library.

(2) That a site visit to both sites be arranged (proposed site for Stockroom and existing site of Central Library) to understand the scale and size of both sites, to understand what it means to have special educational needs and to understand their journey.

ECONOMY AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
25 November 2021

Agenda item 5. Future High Street Fund – Stockroom

Consideration was given to a report (copies of which had been circulated) providing an update on progress with Stockport's High Street Fund project, Stockroom, and updating Members on the recent consultation which had been undertaken.

The Cabinet Member for Economy and Regeneration (Councillor David Meller) and Nick How from Qa Research attended the meeting to respond to questions from the Scrutiny Committee.

The following comments were made/issues raised:-

- Reference was made to the differences in the consultation responses between those which were on-line and those which were face-to-face with a majority of residents who completed the online self completion questionnaire disagreeing with the proposal to move library services from Central Library to Stockroom.
- The proposals were geared to creating more potential users of the library than those who current used the Central Library. However, a number of library users had indicated that they wouldn't use the library service if it went to Stockroom.
- Concern was expressed that the majority of people who responded to the consultation had indicated that they wished to keep the library in its current location and the proposals in the report went against their wishes.
- A Member enquired whether the possibility of expanding the Central Library building had been explored.
- A Member's perception was that the area around Central Library felt safer than the Merseyway Precinct.
- Concern was expressed about the longevity of the fabric of the Merseyway Precinct given its age.
- The linkage of the Changing Places toilet facilities to the Stockroom building were raised as this had not been referred to in the original proposals.
- There was the opportunity to provide a significant community space through Stockroom which would be accessible to all. There would be a sensory room and changing facilities with hoists for severely disabled children.
- Concern was expressed that a majority of residents with a disability or long term health condition were opposed to the proposals.
- Residents had not been advised of the possible alternative uses for the Central Library at the time of the consultation. A clear strategy was required which could be shared with everybody.
- A Member set out how he had become more reassured as he had acquired more information about the proposals and the intention behind them. He supported cultural activities being held in the Central Library building such as concerts.
- The report highlighted for the first time that the digitisation of resources (library, museum and heritage archives) was distinct from the proposals for Stockroom.
- By reference to the drawings attached to the report, a Member expressed concern about how easy the Stockroom building would be for residents to find their way around.
- If there were concerns about the accessibility of Central Library as a library building, the same concerns would exist if the building was used as an adult education centre.

RESOLVED – (6 for, 3 against) That the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Cabinet do not proceed with moving library services from Central Library.