

Proposals for the Mobile Library Service

Report of the Head of Service of Communities

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Cabinet (and confirmation under the provisions of the Council's Constitution) before taking effect.

1) Recommendation

That the Cabinet be asked to approve the recommended Option 2 – Decommission the Mobile Library vehicles and provide £25K transition support for vulnerable users to continue to access alternative library provision.

2) Summary / Reasons for Recommendations

Given the significant pressures on the Council's finances, on balance the Council considers that the proposals are a reasonable solution to reducing costs and the need for considerable reinvestment in mobile library vehicles when there are viable and more cost-effective alternatives that have the potential to develop the reach of our quality library services closer to people in their communities.

Whilst the service is well regarded by its users, the usage is comparatively low, does not represent a cost-effective means of delivering the service, and given the financial challenges, is ultimately not sustainable. Reducing the costs from this service will help to secure the wider sustainability of library services in Devon.

3) Background / Introduction

Through the service contract with Libraries Unlimited, the Council provides for a mobile library service. The service has been reducing in demand over the last 10 years. In 2013, a major service review was completed resulting in reducing the mobile library fleet from 8 to 4 vehicles. There are 374 'stops' on a 4 weekly cycle for 4 routes. Stops vary from 15 minutes to 1hr depending on the location and number of visits.

More recently the stops where there have been consistently less than 4 active members who visit the stop, have also been removed. Last year the Torrington mobile vehicle was destroyed due to an arson attack and was not replaced. The reserve vehicle was put into action and subsequently when there is a scheduled maintenance break or a breakdown, the service for that area does not operate.

In 2021, Libraries Unlimited replaced one of the less mechanically reliable vehicles with a second-hand refurbished van. This was funded from a small grant from DCC and local

fundraising with the balance made up from Libraries Unlimited reserves. There remain 3 vehicles owned by DCC.

The vehicles are ending their serviceable life and the Council needs to make a decision regarding the future of the mobile service. New, smaller vehicles cost in the region of £150-200k per vehicle so a significant capital investment would be required to continue to operate this service into the future.

There are currently around 3100 active users of the service who use at least 1 of the 374 stops around the county. Through previous years, active users have been gradually declining, as have the number of stops and subsequently stock issues.

We have an extensive network of 50 static libraries across the County and many of the stops are near or close to one our existing buildings. An analysis of the stops in relation to the 20 * largest libraries concluded:

- 15.51% of mobile stops 3 miles or less by road
- 39.84% of mobile stops 5 miles or less by road
- 84.49% Mobile stops 10 miles or less by road

**Barnstaple, Bideford, Chagford, Crediton, Cullompton, Dartmouth, Exeter, Exmouth, Holsworthy, Honiton, Ilfracombe, Ivybridge, Newton Abbot, Okehampton, Sidmouth, South Molton, Tavistock, Teignmouth, Tiverton and Totnes*

There are also existing and complementary services that support vulnerable members such as the *Good Neighbour* scheme where friends, family and neighbours can sign up to reserve, pick up and drop off books, and the *Home Library* service where volunteers fulfil the same role. The use of the online resources such as e-books, audiobooks and magazines have continued to grow in popularity since COVID and remain strong post pandemic. Libraries Unlimited also support many book clubs.

The Council will also, as part of its developing future libraries strategy support development of relationships with community libraries across the county and work on testing a model that provides access to our library network for rural communities.

During April and May this year the Council consulted with users of the service to help inform its strategy going forward and to find out more about the users of mobile libraries in Devon to hear more from people about potential alternative solutions. The return rate was around 30% of current active members of the service and the findings from the consultation are detailed in section 6.

The Council, like all Local Authorities in England, is facing significant financial pressures and is needing to review ways across all services to reduce cost and limit future investment. The Council, unlike most Council's in England has not reduced its Library footprint, and through its strong partnership with Libraries Unlimited has continued to reduce costs whilst maintaining a high quality and evolving offer.

However, the Council has to live within its means and delivery of efficient and cost-effective services are required in order to sustain any comprehensive library offer.

4) Proposal

The proposal is to decommission the Mobile Library vehicles and to support active members to utilise existing alternatives such as digital, library buildings, the home library service and good neighbour schemes by December 2023.

Feedback from the consultation highlighted a proportion of existing members with physical disabilities and issues with transportation and self-isolation. Therefore, the proposal would include a one-off investment of £25,000 to support expansion of the alternative service options listed above and to provide support to our vulnerable members so that they are able to continue to access library services as far as possible.

Following feedback from the consultation we will also work with Libraries Unlimited to develop a rural outreach offer that includes how the Council can provide support to the community libraries around the County.

5) Options / Alternatives

5.1 Option 1 – Decommission the Mobile Library vehicles.

There are viable alternatives currently available to using mobile vehicles including library buildings, digital, home library scheme and good neighbour scheme. The Council would also develop a community library support scheme for rural areas that will in many circumstances mitigate the mobile visits. There would be a capital return for the vehicles estimated at £18,000.

The Council would work closely with Libraries Unlimited regarding future investment in rural outreach library services.

5.2 Option 2 – Decommission the Mobile Library vehicles and provide £25K transition support for vulnerable users to continue to access alternative library provision.

The Council would provide funding to help with the transition to other existing and new library services to ensure that the most vulnerable members of the mobile library community continue to access services they value.

5.3 Option 3 – Replace the 4 mobile libraries with new vehicles.

There would be upfront capital investment of between £600-800k to purchase the vehicles and would expect the running costs to be lower with more efficient and smaller mobiles. This option would be investing heavily in the service now and continuing in its current format. With numbers of active members, stock issues and visits at some stops gradually reducing we have discounted this option in favour of a wider rural access offer.

6) Consultation

A Consultation was launched on 31st March aimed at current mobile library users on a proposal, within the context of the financial challenges that Devon County Council currently faces, to end the current mobile library service delivered by Libraries Unlimited, and instead

to seek and develop further alternative arrangements to ensure that people can continue to access and engage with their local library or library service.

Mobile library customers were advised of this consultation through email, social media and promotional materials in the mobile vans and every library building. The consultation ran for eight weeks allowing the library van to complete two four weekly routes.

Overall, 1197 consultation responses were received from individuals, households and one school. Letters and emails were also received from individuals and on behalf of groups and town councils. 95% of respondents said they or a family member use the mobile library, with 93% using it every month or as often as it comes to their stop or village.

The main demographic of respondents are older, with 79% over the age of 65 and 44% being 75 or older and primarily female (72%). Just over a third (34%) considered themselves to have a disability, with 13% saying that their day-to-day activities are limited a lot.

Consultation feedback showed how valuable the service is to its users, averaging 4.46 out of 5 in importance. Some of the key themes highlighting why the service is considered essential by users are:

- *it's easy access to books*
- *location convenience*
- *lack of access to cars/public transport*

The mobile library allows users to take out more books than at a static library with longer return times, no fines and no charges to reserve a book. These were all seen as a significant benefit and an essential given the rural locations the mobile library visits.

The service was often described as one of the last services in rural villages and therefore has become a place to meet, socialise and catch up with neighbours and the librarians. The social aspect was mentioned in 18% of respondents' comments. For some that said they are isolated or unable to get out of the house much, the social aspect of the service is the only time they get to talk to people. It was also mentioned that having access to books was a lifeline to help combat isolation and loneliness, concluding that this has benefited their mental health.

A few responses were received from children; however, as under 18, this data was not captured on the consultation. It must be noted that children are an important demographic of the mobile library user, as 9% of respondents mentioned children or grandchildren's access to books and reading when describing how essential the service was to them. Children were also reflected in the most popular stop mentioned in the consultation, Witheridge (5%), where the van visits the local primary schools. Another primary school responded on behalf of their reception class, mentioning the service was a 'lifeline for rural schools and future literacy'.

The consultation questions wanted to unearth if any users also used other services that Libraries Unlimited offer. 21% of respondents said they had recently visited a static library building, and 21% said they would do so if the mobile library service ceased. The main reason for not using a static library was not having access to a car or public transport to get there, with 34% of responses mentioning this. This was also one of the primary pieces of feedback given in the free text box as well as parking, fuel cost and time it would take to

travel to a library building. Considering the primary age demographic, 27% mentioned they would have difficulty carrying heavy books home, particularly the number of books they would averagely get from the mobile library. 16% mentioned they could not access a static library due to health conditions or disability, and 10% said they did not have time due to caring responsibilities.

The digital library service has been accessed less than a static library, with only 15% of respondents saying they currently use it. Some who mentioned they used the service said they had received audiobooks from the mobile library. Half of the respondents said they prefer a physical book, and 28% said they do not have access to a computer or are not confident with using a computer or device. Many said this was not an option due to bad connectivity in their rural location and 6% said they would continue to access the digital library if the mobile library service ceased.

Over half (53%) felt like the mobile library service is their only way of accessing library services in Devon and said they would or could not use the library service at all if the service stopped. A further 28% said they would use the library service less. Some comments expressed concern and worry over relying on volunteers, and the viability of the Home Library Service, but 8% said they would use this option and 1.5% said they would use the Good Neighbours scheme. A key theme mentioned was the need for users retaining independence than these alternatives provided, which is valued through the mobile service, and a small number were not keen on the idea of books being chosen on their behalf. 8% said they would visit a community library not run by Devon County Council instead.

At the end of the consultation, consultees were provided an opportunity to offer other ideas on how they would like to engage with library services. 515 comments were made, with a majority of respondents wanting to keep the mobile library service running. Other ideas mentioned include paying a small fee to access the service, extending borrowing times and providing/helping run small libraries in community facilities and providing better parking at static libraries.

This section was also used for general comments where there was a primary feeling of sadness, disappointment, anger and further isolation over the potential ceasing of this service and the reduction of other services, including public transport in rural villages. Concerns were also made around the environmental impact of ceasing this service, meaning more cars will be on the road to visit static libraries.

7) Strategic Plan

<https://www.devon.gov.uk/strategic-plan>

The recommended proposal, alongside a commitment for further investment in community based support and ongoing significant investment in the wider Library service, maintains the Council's commitment to its Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025.

8) Financial Considerations

It will require capital investment of £600k-800k to replace the mobile library fleet. There is no capital allocation in the Corporate Capital programme and if option 3 was preferred an

application would need to be made to the Corporate Programme Group for allocation of funding.

The combined annual running costs of the 4 Mobile libraries is £217,000 which if the vehicles are decommissioned, will be a saving to support the delivery of library services across the County.

The Council proposes a £25k one-off funding for expanding and developing alternatives funded through dedicated budget to support vulnerable people in Devon.

The implementation costs for Libraries Unlimited will be for potential redundancies estimated to be a maximum of £63k including strain costs of the Mobile Library Assistants. Libraries Unlimited are currently running a staff consultation pending the decision on the future of the service. We are working closely with Libraries Unlimited to ensure the Council's liabilities are minimised through redeployment opportunities within the service.

9) Legal Considerations

The Council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide comprehensive and efficient library service. The Mobile Library service falls within this duty. The Council considers that with the alternatives proposed alongside development of community library support the Council will continue to meet its statutory obligations.

10) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change)

This proposal will not significantly affect factors relating to climate change. There will be a reduction in direct emissions and fossil fuels from the aging diesel vehicles as a result of decommissioning.

There is likely to be an increase in car journeys where users will access a library building, however these journeys are will probably be multi-purpose.

11) Equality Considerations

Where relevant, in coming to a decision the Equality Act 2010 Public Sector Equality Duty requires decision makers to give due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other prohibited conduct;
- advance equality by encouraging participation, removing disadvantage, taking account of disabilities and meeting people's needs; and
- foster good relations between people by tackling prejudice and promoting understanding

in relation to the protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership (for employment), pregnancy and maternity, race/ethnicity, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation).

A decision maker may also consider other relevant factors such as caring responsibilities, rural isolation or socio-economic disadvantage.

In progressing this particular scheme / proposal, an Impact Assessment has been prepared which has been circulated separately to Cabinet Members and also is available on the Council's website at [https://www.devon.gov.uk/impact/published Mobile Libraries closures - Impact Assessment \(devon.gov.uk\)](https://www.devon.gov.uk/impact/published-Mobile-Libraries-closures-Impact-Assessment-devon.gov.uk). The key points have been included in section 4 of this report.

Members will need to consider the Impact Assessment for the purposes of this item / meeting.

12) Risk Management Considerations

This policy/proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been taken / included to safeguard the Council's position.

These are outlined within the related Impact Assessment and in the Council's consideration of its consultation. Risks regarding alternative provision are low, given that these relate to existing service.

Simon Kitchen, Head of Communities

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Public Health, Communities and Equality Councillor Roger Croad

Local Government Act 1972: List of background papers

Background Paper Nil

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Proposals for the Mobile Library Service - Final