

Nottingham City Council

Communities and Environment Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held in the Ground Floor Committee Room - Loxley House, Station Street, Nottingham, NG2 3NG on 4 December 2024 from 2:12pm to 4:57pm

Membership

Present

Councillor Imran Jalil (Chair)
Councillor Devontay Okure (Vice Chair)
Councillor Faith Gakanje-Ajala
Councillor Patience Uloma Ifediora
Councillor AJ Matsiko
Councillor David Mellen

Absent

Councillor Andrew Rule

Councillor Maria Watson (Substitute for Councillor Andrew Rule)

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Terranum Abbas - Libraries Service Manager
Stephen Chartres - Performance and Improvement Manager
Nigel Hawkins - Head of Culture and Libraries
Councillor Corall Jenkins - Executive Member for Communities, Waste and Equality
Councillor Sam Lux - Executive Member for Carbon Reduction, Leisure and Culture
Adrian Mann - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Kate Morris - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Colin Parr - Corporate Director for Communities, Environment and Resident Services
Councillor Ethan Radford - Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Skills, Growth and Economic Development
Colin Wilderspin - Interim Director of Communities

The Chair made a statement that the Committee was keen to ensure that its work reflected the voice and concerns of the public in a way that enabled all relevant stakeholders to have an opportunity to be heard, while allowing the Committee to conduct its business effectively. The Chair explained that the Committee was actively looking at ways in which it could facilitate public engagement on relevant issues, but that it would not be taking direct questions from public attendees in relation to any items on the current agenda. The Chair thanked everyone who had sent in questions, comments and views on the agenda items prior to the meeting, which had been forwarded to the relevant Executive Members and officers, and would be included as part of the consultation returns. The Chair noted that, where appropriate, the relevant Executive Members and officers would provide direct responses to the questions raised either during the meeting or following.

26 Changes to Membership

The Committee noted that Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos had stepped down as a member of the Committee.

27 Appointment of the Vice Chair

Resolved to appoint Councillor Devontay Okure as the Vice Chair of the Committee for the 2023/24 municipal year.

28 Apologies

Councillor Andrew Rule - unwell

29 Declarations of Interests

None

30 Minutes

The Committee confirmed the Minutes of the meetings held on 4 September 2024 and 18 September 2024 as a correct record and they were signed by the Chair.

31 Shape the Vision - Consultation on Library Service Budget Proposals

Councillor Sam Lux, Executive Member for Carbon Reduction, Leisure and Culture; Colin Parr, Corporate Director for Communities, Environment and Resident Services; Colin Wilderspin, Interim Director of Communities; Nigel Hawkins, Head of Culture and Libraries; Terranum Abbas, Libraries Service Manager; and Stephen Chartres, Performance and Improvement Manager, presented a report on the outcomes of the recent public consultation on the future provision of libraries in Nottingham. The following points were raised:

- a) The need to ensure a balanced overall budget means that the Council must reduce its spend on its statutory Libraries Service by £1.5 million over the next two years. As a consequence, the closure of four community libraries is being considered, along with the reduction of opening hours more generally. A consultation process was carried out from 28 May to 19 August on the developing proposals for the future the libraries network, to which there were over 5,000 responses from individual people, organisations and stakeholders. Where library closures are being considered, some expressions of interests have been received from partners in moving other community services into these buildings and ongoing engagement is underway. The consultation results will be considered fully and be used to inform the final proposals being made to the Council's Executive Board on 21 January 2025.
- b) The consultation process aimed to help assess the impacts of reducing the number of library buildings from 15 to 11, while also shortening opening hours, staffing levels and expenditure across the network, and set out the key principles for a sustainable future service. The range of equality impacts are also being considered in the context of individual area needs assessments and data on how

people access their libraries. Engagement with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has been carried out as part of the development of the proposals.

- c) On the basis of the consultation returns, the new Central Library was the most-used library building in the city, with a large catchment. However, a strong return showing high usage was also received from the Basford Library, which is one of those at risk of closure. Many of the replies raised concerns about the equity of the proposed future service and the impacts on children, the elderly and the city's most disadvantaged communities. The shortening of opening hours making libraries less accessible was reflected as a significant issue. As a result, work is being carried out to explore how the libraries network can be both as efficient and as accessible as possible.
- d) The consultation outcomes will be used as part of developing an effective and sustainable library network to meet both the local need and the Council's statutory duties. In order to deliver this, the Council will need to work in different ways with a wide range of people and partners, including on establishing a strong volunteer network. A 'Community Hubs' structure is being developed to provide multi-use community facilities, with further investment opportunities being explored for expanding digital services and access.

The Committee raised the following points in discussion:

- e) The Committee queried how the new Sherwood Library had been accounted for in the public consultation process concerning the future network as a whole, given that proposals were being made for changes to its operation (such as its opening hours) before it had yet been opened. It was reported that the public consultation represented a strategic approach to the whole of the future network of libraries for Nottingham and, while four library buildings were being considered for closure, the new library building would be opening in Sherwood – though there had been a number of practical challenges concerning its delivery that had caused delays.
- f) The Committee noted that a public consultation on the future of Nottingham's libraries had been carried out around two years ago and asked whether the overall response received to the new consultation was substantively different. It was explained that the latest consultation had a statutory basis as there were proposals for library building closures – which it had been possible to avoid at the time of the previous consultation. Unfortunately, the cost pressures facing the Service have since become more significant. The previous consultation did receive a strong response and there were a number of similarities to the issues raised. Libraries Service staff were engaged with directly as part of both consultations.
- g) The Committee asked how Community Hubs could be developed effectively to offer a range of sustainable services for a community in a single place, where those services were currently being delivered through multiple buildings. It was set out that a range of possibilities are being explored locally so that community services can be consolidated in the most efficient number of buildings, and this will be factored into the 'best value' considerations being undertaken as part of

developing the final proposals. It is possible that some services offered within libraries, such as access to a computer, could be provided elsewhere.

- h) The Committee asked what investment was being made in innovation, efficiencies and digital access to deliver sustainable services in shared spaces, and how the Council was seeking external funding effectively to help support the continuation of its current library services. It was reported that a full range of investment and commercial options were being explored, along with all possible opportunities for external funding, and that discussions are ongoing. £1.5 million is the ultimate savings target and a great deal of work is being carried out to ensure that it can be delivered effectively.
- i) The Committee asked how it would be demonstrated how the outcomes of the consultation had affected the final proposals in a way that was understandable, and how it had been ensured that the consultation was fully accessible to everyone – especially the most marginalised communities, including refugees living in the city. It was explained that equity had been a strong focus for the consultation, to ensure that a good service offer was maintained in the areas of greatest need. The existing Council guidance on implementing an accessible public consultation was followed fully. The consultation was available in a number of languages and the locations for the in-person engagement events were chosen to be accessible, with sign-language arrangements in place. A child-friendly version of the consultation was also produced, given the importance of libraries to children and young people. A number of lessons were learned from the consultation two years previously – with the questions being made more straightforward and specific outreach being done with communities where previous responses had been lower, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.
- j) The Committee asked whether the consultation response was reflective of all library users as a whole, or whether most of the representations were in relation to the four libraries at risk of closure. It was reported that work had been carried out to set the responses to the consultation in the context of the general data used to track the usage patterns of the Council's libraries across the city. Different communities are able to support their libraries to different degrees in consultation processes – but it is likely that a greater level of representation had been made in relation to the four libraries at risk of closure, with pupils at a school in the area of the at-risk Radford-Lenton Library returning a particularly strong response.
- k) The Committee asked whether the usage of the Central Library was currently at a high level because it was a new building that had only been open for a year. It was explained that, in assessing the consultation results and the overall library usage, the levels and patterns of usage of the Central Library in its previous building had been accounted for in the analysis of the data, and these were consistent with the data for the library in its new location.
- l) The Committee noted that everything possible should be done to ensure that Ward Councillors are provided with full information regarding the proposals affecting the libraries in their areas.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Carbon Reduction, Leisure and Culture, the Corporate Director for Communities, Environment and Resident Services, the Interim Director of Communities, the Head of Culture and Libraries, the Libraries Service Manager and the Performance and Improvement Manager for attending the meeting to present the report and answer the Committee's questions.

Resolved:

- 1) To request that further detail is provided on how the Council demonstrates that it has taken public feedback from the consultation into account as part of the final decision-making process.**
- 2) To request that the Executive Member for Carbon Reduction, Leisure and Culture confirms in writing, for clarity, how proposals that will affect the new Sherwood Library were accounted for as part of the consultation on the future library network provision for the city.**
- 3) To recommend that the following information is included as part of the final Libraries Service proposals report to the Executive Board meeting on 21 January 2025:**
 - a) details of how digital services, the use and development of shared spaces, innovation, and the potential for commercial income have been taken into account and considered in the development of the final proposals;**
 - b) what external funding options have been taken into consideration in terms of grants available to the Council and how this has fed into the development of the final proposals; and**
 - c) the demonstration of how the Council has taken an overarching and strategic view of how the Libraries Service and other community services could be co-located to provide savings.**
- 4) To recommend that the Council does everything possible to ensure that people seeking asylum living in the city are able to have their say in the delivery of the future Libraries Service by being involved effectively in consultations.**

32 Community Centres Review

Councillor Corall Jenkins, Executive Member for Communities, Waste and Equality; Colin Parr, Corporate Director for Communities, Environment and Resident Services; and Colin Wilderspin, Interim Director of Communities, presented a report on the developing proposals to ensure a network of self-sustaining community centres across the city. The following points were raised:

- a) As part of the Council's wider savings proposals to achieve an overall financially sustainable position, subsidies of £613,298 for community centres are to be discontinued by April 2025. The Committee considered the development of these proposals previously at its meeting in July, and it is intended to bring final proposals to the Council's Executive Board at its meeting on 21 January 2025. Although it is not a statutory requirement for the Council to directly support community centres, work is being carried out to ensure the sustainable delivery of

community services in the future as much as possible. As a result, wherever achievable, active community centre buildings will not be sold off and work is underway locally on the development of a sustainable core offer for community centres. In addition, expressions of interest are being sought from partners for the operation of community centres by their communities.

- b) Ultimately, however, the proposed savings will result in a reduction in non-statutory services and the associated Council staffing, so the related Equality Impact Assessments are being reviewed. However, a staff team will still be maintained to deliver the Council's core community centre offer and help support local community and voluntary activity. Currently, 35 community buildings are under review (some of which are currently empty or have significant repair costs), which cover a wide range of sizes and staffing levels – and each building is being considered on the basis of its particular circumstances. New leases and operating agreements are being completed under the new Corporate Landlord model where appropriate, including the establishment of market-level rents – which is having a significant impact on community centres, but is considered to be necessary for the Council in delivering best value for money. A full risk analysis, with appropriate mitigations, has been compiled.

The Committee raised the following points in discussion:

- c) The Committee asked what the timeline was for either bringing empty community centre buildings back into use, or selling them. It was reported that, pending final decisions being made in January, the intention would be to move to sell empty community buildings where no viable future use has been identified. There is a regular cost associated with the Council holding empty buildings, but this has been accounted for in the associated budgets.
- d) The Committee asked what the potential costs of a service deficit would be (particularly in the context of preventative services) if the proposals for community centres resulted in a number of them ceasing to operate. It was explained that a full risk assessment was being carried out as part of the final decision-making process, including what services might be displaced and how they could be provided elsewhere. The social value aspect of a given community centre will be taken into consideration when planning the business case for its future operation, wherever possible. The Council will work closely with groups that want to stay in their community buildings going forward to seek to develop sustainable operational models. Full cost analysis work has been carried out to help inform the final proposals in delivering best value effectively.
- e) The Committee asked whether an incremental approach could be taken to reducing the Council subsidy to community centres and then bringing them up to market rent. It was set out that a cost analysis and consultation process has been carried out with community stakeholders to develop an effective, non-statutory offer to continue the sustainable operation and delivery of community services at a local level, going forward. The Council will work with community groups on as many options as possible to support them in their ongoing provision of local services, including the potential staggering of rent increases.

- f) The Committee asked whether the Council would seek to generate a profit from community centre provision going forward, or whether the new core offer would operate on a cost-neutral basis. It was explained that the new core offer was based on defined key metrics and intended to deliver best value, with the increase in rents not being intended to generate revenue. The Council is exploring all avenues for bringing in external funding for community centre provision, but a decision has not yet been made on whether external money should be used as part of delivering the core offer, or whether it should instead be used to help fund services beyond the core offer.
- g) The Committee asked what other approaches had been considered for community centres beyond the implementation of the Corporate Landlord model, and how the social value provided by community centres could be connected into the wider health and care systems. It was reported that, in the context of its current financial position, the Council will work as closely as possible with local community centres on how they can be self-sustaining in the delivery of non-statutory services. Engagement is being carried out with the local NHS Place-Based Partnerships on the joined-up delivery of wider community services. However, other public, voluntary and community partners are also in very challenging financial positions – including the local NHS. Nevertheless, the wider options and offers are being explored with partners as part of supporting as many community centres as possible to become self-sustaining in the long-term, backed up by a basic core offer from the Council.
- h) The Committee asked how it could be ensured that all community centre buildings were as modernised and energy efficient as possible, to limit their operational running costs in the long term. It was explained that a full condition report had been carried out for all of the community buildings under consideration to assess their repair needs and the landlord investment requirements. The Council does have access to national Community Grants and will work as closely as possible with community groups so that they can run the buildings effectively, going forward.
- i) The Committee noted that, where statutory services were provided from community centres, everything possible must be done to ensure that they continue to be delivered in an effective way. The Committee also considered that it was vital for there to be very clear and accessible lines of communication between the Council and the affected communities for the purposes of providing support and answering questions.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Communities, Waste and Equality, the Corporate Director for Communities, Environment and Resident Services and the Interim Director of Communities for attending the meeting to present the report and answer the Committee's questions.

Resolved:

- 1) To request that additional information is provided detailing if (and how) additional support could be offered to groups that take on community centres around improving the energy efficiency of the building to reduce running costs.**

- 2) **To request that details are provided around the current costs for ensuring the security of empty community centres.**
- 3) **To request that the risk versus cost analysis is provided for the overall proposals.**
- 4) **To request that information is provided on what external funding is being used by the Council to support community centres.**
- 5) **To recommend that a clear weighting is given to the range of Council services delivered within community centres in terms of the social value assessments.**
- 6) **To recommend that full and thorough consideration is given to staggering the timelines for implementation of savings to allow community groups time to develop the necessary business plans.**
- 7) **To recommend that a five-year sustainability plan is included as part of any formal decision to be taken by the Executive Board, to ensure that community services have proper continuity.**
- 8) **To recommend that accountability is improved and ensure that all community groups are provided with key points of contact at the Council for engagement and support around the development of business plans.**

33 Recommendation Tracker 2023/24

The Chair presented the latest responses received in relation to the recommendations made by the Committee to the Council's Executive.

The Committee noted the Recommendation Tracker.

34 Recommendation Tracker 2024/25

The Chair presented the latest responses received in relation to the recommendations made by the Committee to the Council's Executive.

The Committee noted the Recommendation Tracker.

35 Work Programme

The Chair presented the Committee's current Work Programme for the 2024/25 municipal year.

The Committee noted the Work Programme.