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MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE Council Chamber - Town Hall 3 February 2025 (8.00 - 10.10 pm)

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	David Taylor (Chairman), Ray Best and +Damian White
Havering Residents' Group	Philippa Crowder, Laurance Garrard and +Christine Smith
Labour Group	Matthew Stanton
East Havering Residents Group	Darren Wise

Apologies were received for the absence of Councillor Osman Dervish, Councillor Robby Misir and Councillor John Wood. (Councillor Smith substituted for Councillor Misir and Councillor D White substituted for Councillor Dervish)

Councillor Martin Goode was also present at the meeting.

All decisions were taken with no votes against.

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

74 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

+ Apologies were received for the absence of Councillor Osman Dervish substituted by Councillor Damian White, Councillor Robby Misir substituted by Councillor Christine Smith. Councillor John Wood also gave an apology for absence.

The Sub-Committee noted the apology from the Councillor Gillian Ford (Cabinet Member) who had received a late notification of this meeting but she had a prior invitation to the Sports Council Awards evening which was arranged well in advance of tonight's meeting.

75 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interests.

76 LIBRARY CONSULTATION

At the request of the Sub-Committee, a pre decision scrutiny was undertaken to review the Council's budget setting exercise for 2023-24 that included proposals to reduce the revenue budget of the Council's library service by £300,000 over two years.

This prompted the production of a Library Strategy that would set out how the library service would function in the next few years. The Council's current statutory library provision consists of ten library sites, together with the Home Library service, the local studies library and a digital and online library.

It was noted in the report that amongst other things, the Library Strategy provided for the potential closure of 4 out of 5 branch libraries.

The report considered the outcome of the consultation on the draft Library Strategy that sought views of stakeholders on the Strategy and on the option for the Council to close up to four branch libraries.

It was explained that following careful analysis of all the responses received during the consultation including the public survey, stakeholder feedback, petitions and correspondence received, the condition of the libraries, the Council's ability to invest capital, and the Council funding gap it was considered that Council funding for three branch libraries should cease. It was noted that the result in the consequential loss of service of three branch libraries that were recommended to close on 31 March 2025 and achieve an annual saving of £288k.

It was stated that against a backdrop of continuing significant financial pressures for the Council, which included the need to request exceptional financial support from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in order to set a balanced budget for the financial year 2024/25, the budget included proposals to reduce the revenue budget of the Council's library service by £300,000 over two years. The library service accordingly developed a draft library strategy which included a set of proposals to close a number of libraries in order to deliver that saving.

The evidence of need to apply for a capitalisation direction from the Government includes a thorough scrutiny of budget making decisions. The Council must demonstrate to the Government it is doing everything in its control to reduce costs and to deliver savings. Without making these difficult decisions, a request for a capitalisation direction may not be successful which could put further services at risk.

The draft strategy comprised:

- Proposals to reduce the revenue budget of the service by means to closing up to four of the five “branch” libraries (Collier Row, Elm Park, Gidea Park, Harold Wood, South Hornchurch);
- Proposals to reduce the service’s book stock budget by 61% (£161,000) in 2024/25 and £30,000 (from the 2023/24 base) in both 2025/26 and 2026/27;
- A detailed needs and usage assessment which was used to develop the proposals;
- A refreshed vision and strategic priorities to underpin the statutory service in coming years;
- Proposals to develop an investment business case seeking capital funding to improve the quality of the library estate;
- Proposals seeking views on whether a purpose-designed children’s library – either at a fixed site or as a mobile provision – could better meet library need in the future.

It was noted that an extensive twelve-week consultation on the draft library strategy began on 10 May 2024 and ended on 2 August 2024.

The Sub-Committee noted that whilst the proposal to determine which branches to close, the report detailed the rationale with the likely impacts of the decision to close the three branch libraries recommended. A full needs assessment that considered all the libraries in Havering was included within the draft Havering Library Strategy 2024-2029. The decision making criteria adopted by the Council seeks an objective basis by reference to the available data, as informed by the needs assessment.

The report recommended the following three branches to close:

- Gidea Park
- Harold Wood
- South Hornchurch

The executives of Unison attended the meeting and gave a representation on behalf of libraries staff.

In response to Members questions, the Sub-Committee was informed that the decision on which branches to put forward was based on multiple factors, including cost savings and the distance to alternative branches. It was stated that all relevant factors were considered and weighted appropriately in the decision-making process. It was emphasized that the difficulty of the decision, fell into a category of decisions that no one wants to make. It was explained that budget pressures were the driving force behind the proposal, although it was acknowledged that the current year’s budget is not directly affected. A key point of context was the £300,000 saving that was agreed upon in Cabinet and Full Council meetings around February of the previous year.

Questions were raised on the potential lease and the status of preparations of the Friends Group who were considering formation with the intention takeover the library from the Council, it was stated that the Group was undertaking a cost-benefit analysis though the full details are currently unclear. The Sub-Committee's attention was drawn to the upcoming Cabinet meeting, where a legal decision relating to this matter would need to be made.

The Sub-Committee and Members in attendance received satisfactory responses to all questions raised.

The Sub-Committee submitted the following comments and recommendation to Cabinet and requested that Cabinet responds to these at its meeting on 5 February 2025.

The Sub-Committee sought assurance that the report EQHIA was correct. This followed a Member query about discrepancies between the EQHIA and Action plan.

Members agreed the following recommendations:

1. That Cabinet delay the decision until a second consultation has been carried out, presenting the proposal to close three libraries to the public, as has taken place in other parts of the country. And that the Officer benchmark what is best practice.
2. That, following the formation of the Friends Group of Harold Wood Library, who are seeking funding, the Cabinet delay the decision to close Harold Wood Library in order that the group might have time to secure funding
3. That the Cabinet seek the opinion of the 151 Officer on whether savings made elsewhere could be used to offset the overspend generated by keeping the libraries open, and whether that would satisfy the CIPFA report and MHCLG with regards to the Capitalisation Directive
4. That the Cabinet explore and outline what work needs to be undertaken to ensure that the remaining libraries do not fall into disrepair and be threatened with closure
5. Cost Breakdown – that Cabinet defer decision until further information is provided on both revenue and capital costs.

Chairman