

Darlington Library Survey Report – November 2016

Background

Darlington Borough Council are proposing to move the town's central library from its present and original home in Crown Street where it has operated as a free library since 1885. They have proposed plans to relocate the library service to a smaller space within the Dolphin Centre, which is the town's sports and leisure centre – this would involve shrinking the services able to be offered by both the library and the Dolphin Centre. Darlington Borough Council have run a previous survey and have recently hosted another survey asking residents' opinions on the design and operation of the proposed relocation of the Central Library Service to the Dolphin Centre.

The survey produced by the Friends of Darlington Libraries aims to establish the views of the residents of Darlington on the Council's proposals for the closure of Crown Street Library and the relocation of Central Library Services to the Dolphin Centre. It will also explore the potential opportunities for sustainable alternatives to the Council's proposals, and whether there is an appetite among the population of Darlington to pursue these alternatives with the aim of urging the Council to explore ways of making these assets more sustainable by generating income. These alternatives could allow the existing services to continue, whilst achieving the necessary financial savings.

Methodology

This survey was launched by the Friends of Darlington Libraries on Thursday 13th October 2016 and ran until Friday 11th November 2016.

The survey was available both online and on paper to ensure it was accessible and able to engage as many people as possible. As the council's proposals particularly affect users of Crown Street Library and the Dolphin Centre, the Council were approached in writing to ask if copies of the survey together with cards detailing the online link could be made available on the reception desks at these locations. Unfortunately, permission was denied and the survey was not permitted to be made available in any public council building.

Despite this, the survey was publicised widely through a variety of methods to ensure that as many residents as possible had the opportunity and means to complete and return the survey. These methods also aimed to ensure that the survey sample was representative of the population and that vulnerable or harder-to-reach groups were consulted.

The survey was promoted in the following ways:

- the launch was covered by the Northern Echo who ran a prominent report and detailed the online link;
- newsletters were sent out to members of the Friends of Darlington Libraries Group and these included the link to the online survey;
- various groups and organisations within the town were contacted and given paper copies of the surveys and the link to the online survey;
- Three Darlington community Facebook sites promoted the link to the online survey;

- there were drop-off and collection points for paper surveys at three well-known business sites within the town;
- volunteers handed out paper surveys and information cards for the online link outside Crown Street Library, the Dolphin Centre and various other strategic points in the town, at differing times of the day throughout the survey period.

Sample

The survey received 744 responses which places the survey within the 95% confidence level with a margin of error of less than 4% for the population of Darlington.

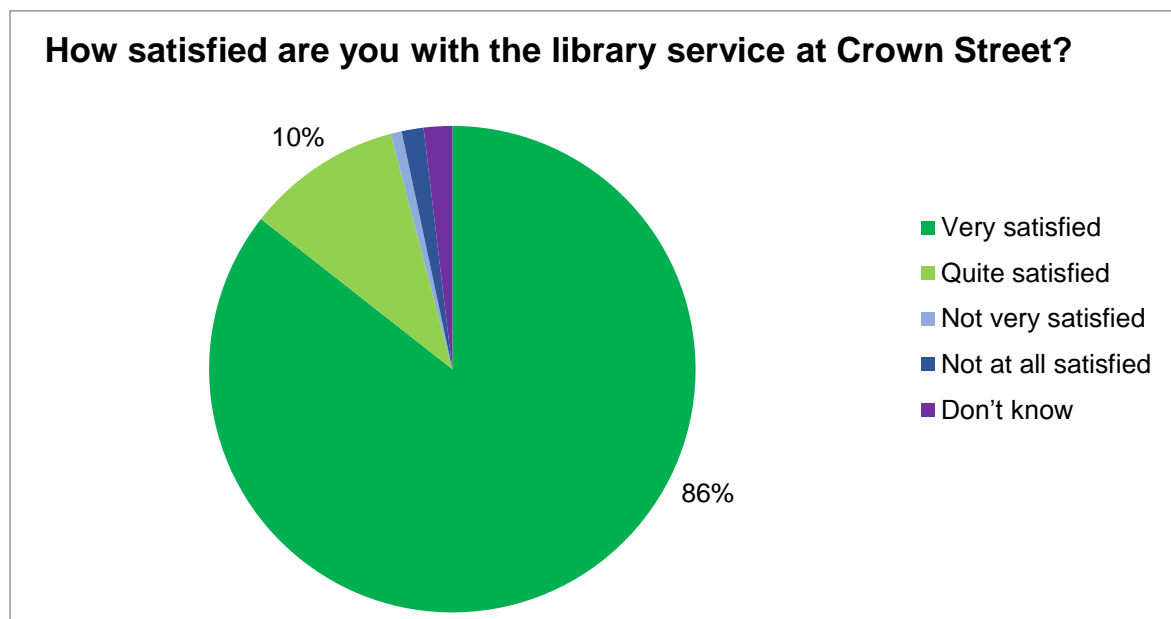
97% of responses were from individuals and 3% were from groups. The groups who completed the survey included several voluntary groups including the following: caring for vulnerable people; people with disabilities; a fitness group; a group comprising of young mothers and their children; a literary group; environmental issues

The survey represents the views of a wide range of respondents, in particular those who use Crown Street Library, the Dolphin Centre or both. The level of interest in the survey from these particular residents is logical as the proposed changes will have the biggest impact on these groups.

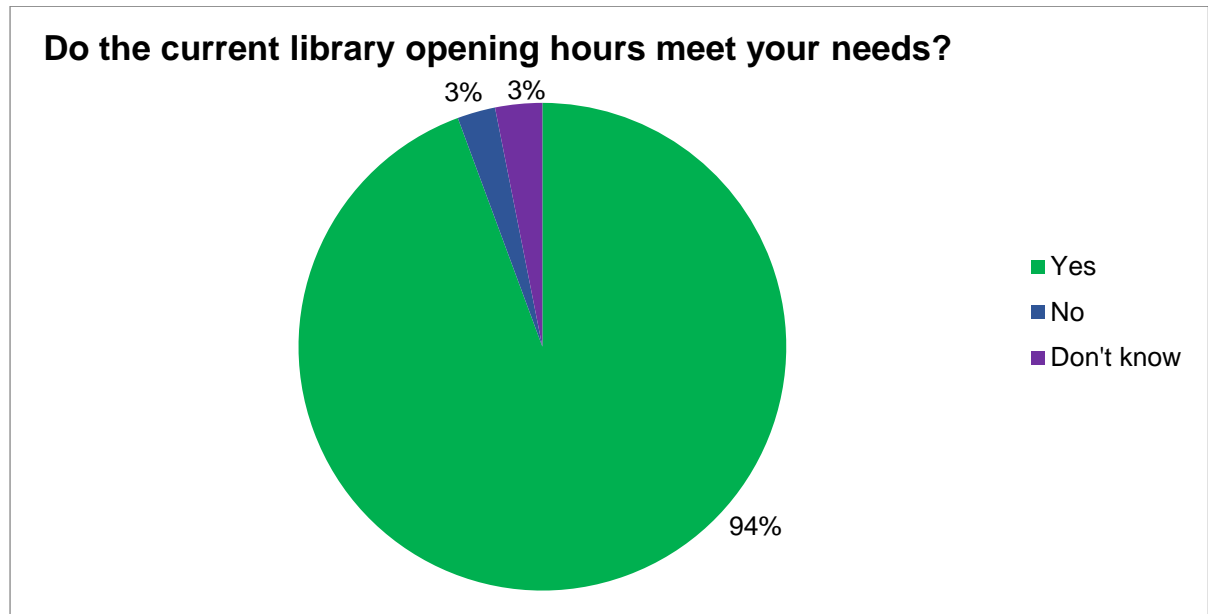
Overall, 90% of respondents reported that they used the library and 60% of respondents reported that they used the Dolphin Centre, with 45% of respondents reporting that they use both the Dolphin Centre and Crown Street library. Only 4% of respondents reported that they never used either the Dolphin Centre or Crown Street library.

Findings

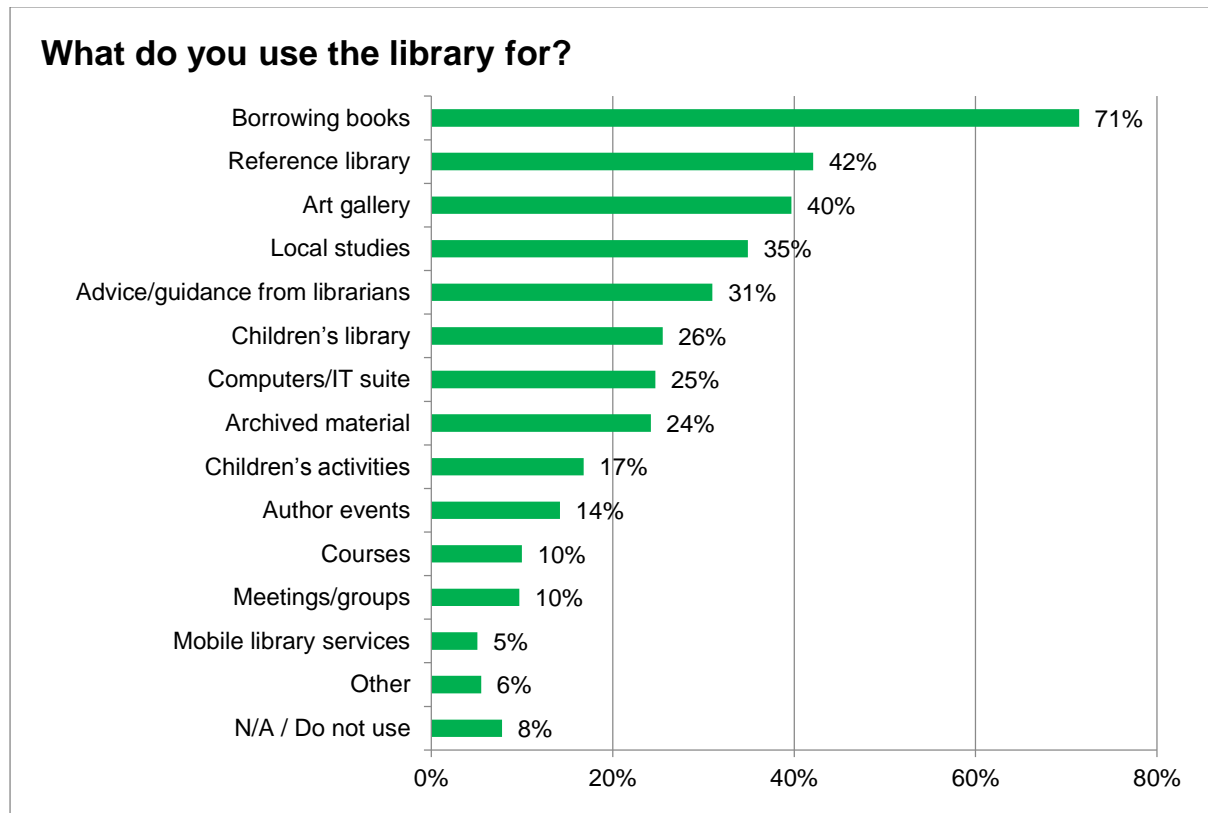
The feedback on the current library service at Crown Street was extremely positive. The vast majority of respondents reported that they were **satisfied with the library service at Crown Street (96%)**: most respondents said that they were very satisfied (86%) and a further 10% said they were quite satisfied.



The vast majority of respondents also reported that the current library opening hours met their needs (94%) suggesting a **lack of need or demand for additional opening hours**.



The survey responses highlight that the **library is used widely for a range of activities and services**. The main uses of library were reported to be for borrowing books (71%), accessing the reference library (42%), visiting the art gallery (40%), local studies (35%), getting advice/guidance from librarians (31%), using the children's library (26%), using the computers/IT suite (25%) and accessing archived material (24%).



These findings were supported by open responses which highlighted the **appreciation of the wide range of services that Crown Street library provides**, and the level of concern about the shrinking of these services if the library is relocated:

'Crown Street Library provides an excellent service, delivered by dedicated, competent librarians in a purpose-built, architecturally superb building. Nothing will be gained, much will be lost by disrupting its operation to transfer it to the Dolphin Centre.'

'I have used the library since I was a child and now I have a son who is 4. We have used the rhyme-time sessions since he was 8 weeks old [] he will ask the librarian if they have a book for whatever it is he's asking questions on. They are always wonderful and take the time to help him find what he's looking for. Taking away or reducing this facility would be devastating to us and many other people in our area.'

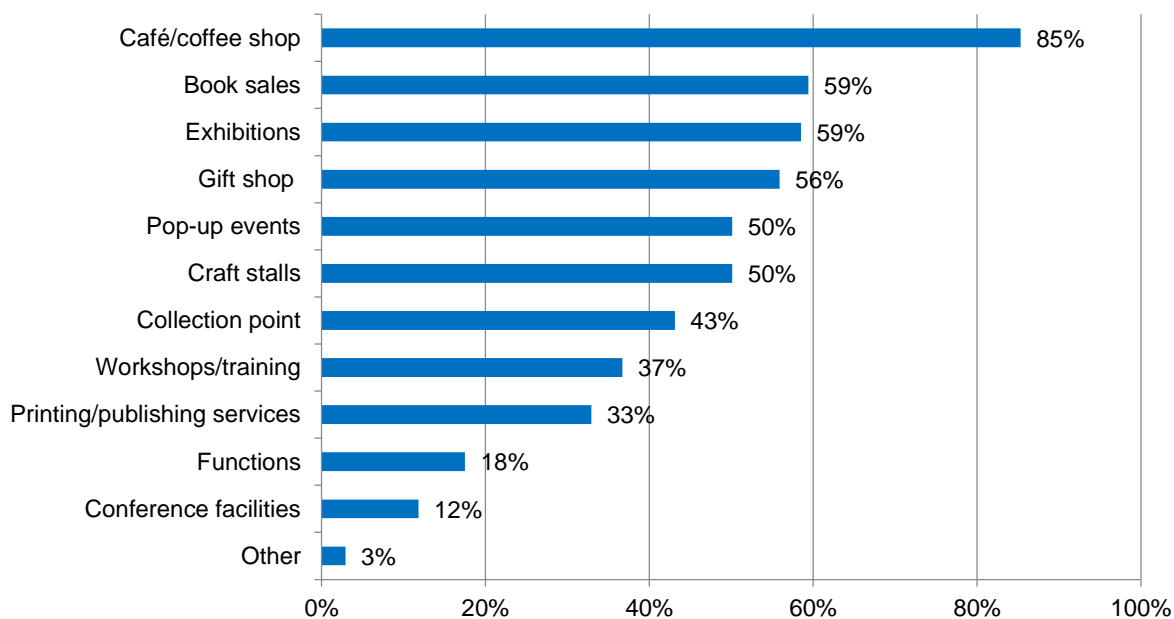
'The Dolphin Centre plans offer a much-reduced service and space, with no room for the Art Gallery or archives. A completely unsuitable plan.'

'The Local Studies is an important part of the Library. It holds archived material which is of great value to many of us in the Town - especially about the Town's history. [] Many people depend on the staff's knowledge and the support from Local Studies staff for research. Lots of elderly find it a comforting and comfortable place to use for companionship and leisure. The building is an integral part of the town's history and it belongs to us.'

'The Library provides an excellent service and is well used. It is a place where people with special needs can go to access reading material and use IT facilities and be with other people.'

Suggestions for **further development of the library were very popular**. In particular, the majority of respondents stated that they/their family would be interested in using the following: café/coffee shop (85%), book sales (59%), exhibitions (59%), gift shop (selling local souvenirs, local interest books, etc.) (56%). Substantial numbers also reported that they would be interested in using craft stalls (50%), pop-up events (50%), collection points, e.g. Amazon (43%), workshops/training (37%) and printing/publishing services (33%).

If provided at the library, would you/your family be interested in using any of the following?



These results suggest that the **potential for generating income** through development of additional activities and facilities at Crown Street is **significant and positive**, and could realistically ensure the **financial viability** of the library.

Again, these results were supported by open comments where respondents expressed their enthusiasm for developing the library to ensure its sustainability by providing additional important services for the community:

‘Do the right thing - keep the library as it is and enhance the services that it has to offer. Put in a coffee and gift shop. Let Citizens Advice work from there. Put in a Macmillan advice centre. Let people pay their council rents there. Utilise the building, don't lose it! Make it an asset and not as you see it, a burden. It is not a burden and it belongs to the people of Darlington.’

‘I believe it's time to mix the needs of today's public. Shelter, warmth, comfort, light snacks, books to borrow, books to sell, books to buy, refreshments, media outlets, creative art and exhibitions should all be under the same roof, borrow elements of what they do upstairs at Waterstones. Crown Street Library has good commercial potential.’

‘Crown Street Library is a beautiful building and should not be sold. It would be better to find additional uses for the building, alongside the library services, some of which have been suggested in this survey.’

Whilst most of those who used public transport could reach the town centre in up to 30 minutes (92%), a substantial number of those using the Dolphin Centre reported that they experienced difficulty/potential danger crossing Tubwell Row (41%). Other issues reported by respondents about using the Dolphin Centre were queues for lifts (33%), difficulty in accessing toilets (25%) and a lack of blue badge parking (15%).

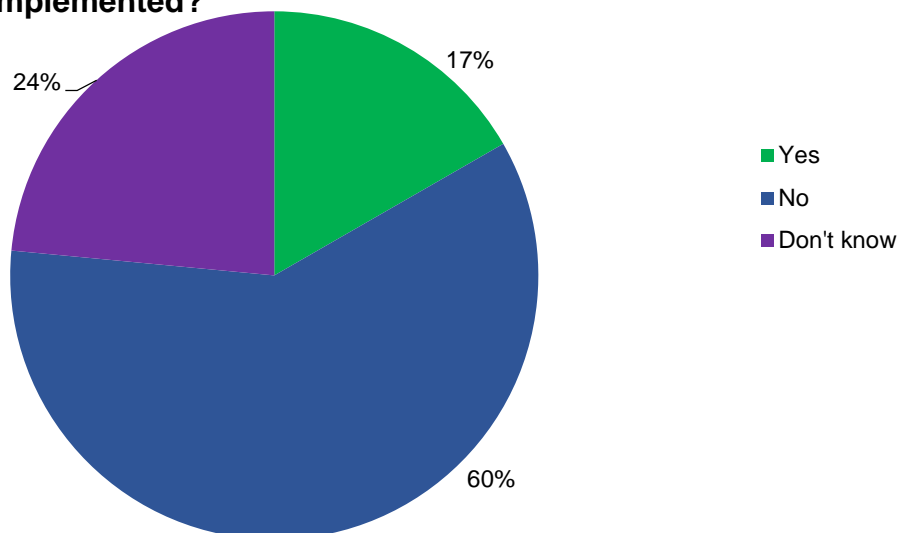
These reported issues currently experienced by Dolphin Centre customers should be given serious consideration as the proposed relocation of the library will **exacerbate these issues** as a result of increasing numbers of people using the building. This concern was also raised by some respondents in their open responses:

'It is really annoying enough to have to go in to the Dolphin Centre and go upstairs to access toilet facilities when shopping. They are sometimes very busy, or closed for cleaning, and the single cubicle on the ground floor is usually occupied, and not very clean. This would be very much worse if all the library users were accessing them also.'

'The Dolphin is always busy, you have to wait for the lift, sometimes 5 mins or longer. It's too hot. The Dolphin centre is for leisure, the Library is for learning and should not be put together. The Dolphin would be too noisy, too hot (damaged books from dry heat) and more difficult to access.'

The majority of Dolphin Centre users (60%) also reported that they would **not be happy to see the proposed changes to the Dolphin Centre** (including a reduction in the number of squash courts, remodelling of the soft play, and structural changes to Central Hall) implemented. A further 24% said they didn't know and only 17% said that they would be happy with the proposed changes to the Dolphin Centre. This highlights the **wider impact of the proposed relocation** of Crown Street Library, beyond those who currently use the library, to those who use the Dolphin Centre too.

Darlington Borough Council's plans for the Dolphin Centre include a reduction in the number of squash courts, remodelling of the soft play area, and structural changes to Central Hall. Would you be happy to see these changes implemented?



These concerns were further addressed in respondents' open comments where they **questioned the suitability of a leisure centre as a location for the library**. Respondents also raised concerns about the impact in terms of **reduction of services for the Dolphin Centre**.

'I love my 'fitlab' classes but with the library under central hall I do wonder how much the noise will carry. Temperature always a problem at Dolphin Centre. I don't think having a library and children's soft play in the same building is a good idea.'

From a child's point of view, I would be thinking I would be going to soft play every time I went into the centre. Could cause a few upsets. Not happy at all about going down to one squash court.'

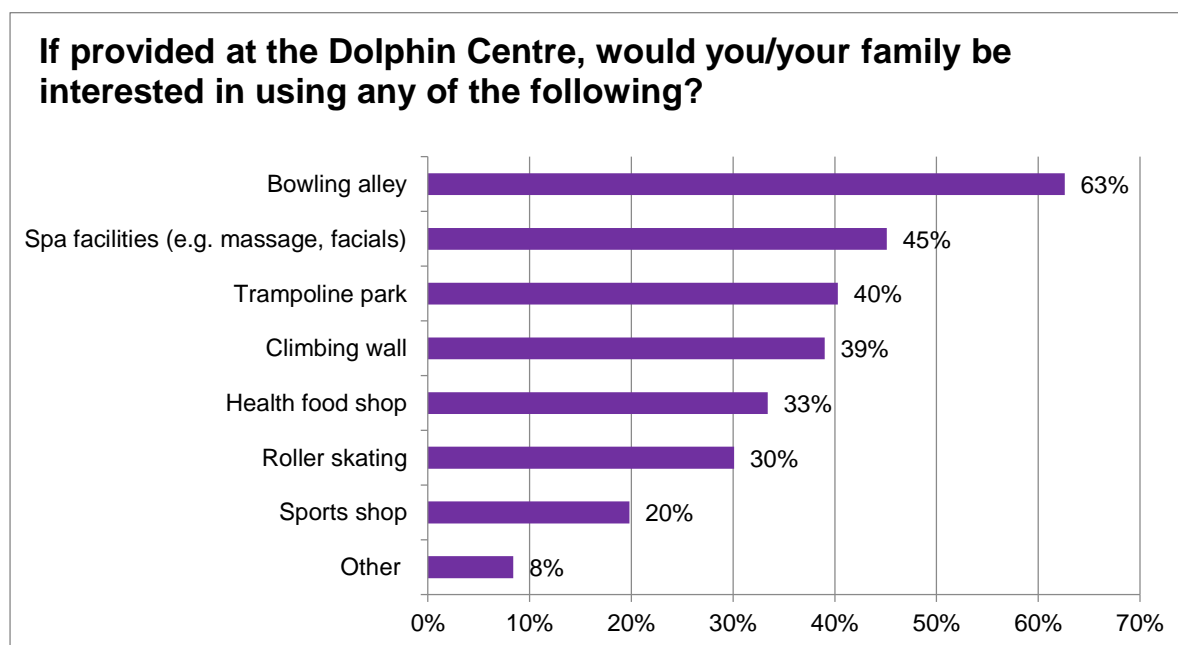
'I use both of these places a lot. My children use the swimming pool and when they were younger they enjoyed going in the soft play. My children love the spacious children's library and the staff are always very friendly and helpful. I am happy with both buildings as they are. Crown Street is a lovely building and perfect as a library..'

'Having looked at the proposed plans for moving the library to the Dolphin Centre, I feel that browsing titles will be more difficult with books seemingly in four different areas in the Dolphin Centre. This is a retrograde step. The current building is easily accessible [] (and) is a beautiful building which it is a pleasure to visit

'The Dolphin Centre is a Leisure and Sports facility which should be used as such. Healthy living and keeping people active to reduce the already huge obesity epidemic. The town is continuously growing and the Dolphin Centre focus should be for people of all ages at all times for swimming, gym, fitness classes, etc. NOT to reduce the already limited space there is there to squeeze in a library.'

'It's a place free for everyone, whereas the Dolphin Centre may put pressure on parents to pay for activities for their children which they cannot afford.'

Many survey respondents were also interested in options for further income-generating development of the Dolphin Centre. **70% of respondents** reported that they would be interested in using at least one of the **suggested options for development**. The most popular options for development were: a bowling alley (63%), spa facilities (45%), a trampoline park (40%) and a climbing wall (39%).



These responses highlight the potential for **alternative income generation for the Dolphin Centre for which the public has an appetite**. Given that these activities are related to sport and exercise it may be more likely that these would be successful in terms of popularity given their location within a leisure centre. Additionally, these would be paid-for activities which could help **increase profitability** of the Dolphin Centre. Again, open responses

support these interpretations, with respondents suggesting that they would welcome development of the Dolphin Centre as a leisure centre.

'Each facility is important in its own right, and the Council could find lots of other different sports and leisure activities to help make the Dolphin Centre pay and be of more interest to people seeking an active life style.'

'Given the plans to increase the number of houses in Darlington by 10,000 I think the council should be doing everything possible to keep both Crown Street and the Dolphin Centre, to ensure a thriving town centre. I went to a climbing wall party at the weekend which was great, but we all travelled to Billingham forum. The council should look at what other leisure centres are successfully offering.'

'I think the Dolphin Centre needs more vision and enthusiasm and to bring in some more facilities, (I think a trampoline park would be a great addition for the youngsters and I would enjoy that too if there was no barrier to age!) to boost numbers and therefore takings, so that it doesn't need the library to move in to prop it up.'

'The building in Crown Street provides a suitable environment for all the library has to offer. Moving the library to the Dolphin will reduce the tranquillity that goes with the use of a library. The Dolphin Centre offers a different leisure facility and could be developed further to meet recent trends and interests of the local population building on the new Feethams Square. Crown Street Library has the potential to be enhanced and be lucrative if used effectively for the locals as well as potential tourists'

Furthermore, many respondents **expressed concerns around the cost associated** with the relocation of the library and felt that **more sustainable investments** could be made to **make savings and generate income long term**, whilst maintaining and improving the important services provided by Crown Street Library and the Dolphin Centre, rather than reducing them:

'I find it difficult to understand the concept that DBC cannot afford to keep the library in Crown Street as they need to make savings and to make the savings they need to borrow £1.6 million. With interest, how much will the move actually cost and how many years will it take to clear the new loans?'

'It is a waste of money! Spending £1.7m to save less than £100k pa is a nonsense.'

'...how can they justify the cost of the move to provide a reduced service?'

'The cost to move the library will take more than 15 years to see the money balance out. There must be a better way to spend our taxes.'

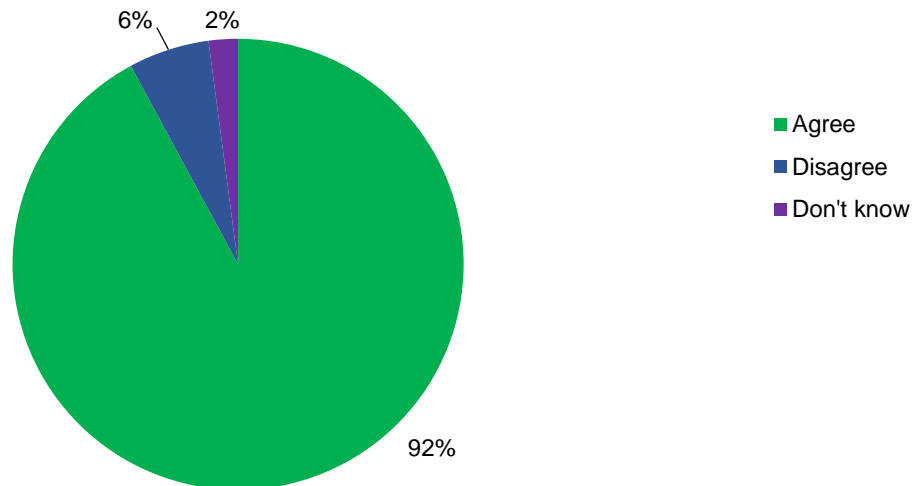
'This council does not have the right to sell something it does not own, and the associated costs of remodelling the Dolphin centre cancel out any financial savings. It is a ludicrous idea.'

'I cannot understand the Council's logic in what they are proposing. []The amount of money which will be needed to make the necessary alterations to the Dolphin Centre could be spent on other services which have been affected by the recent cuts in funding which the Council allege they have been forced to make.'

In light of the results summarised above, it is unsurprising that the **vast majority of respondents (92%) agreed that the people of Darlington deserve to have the provision**

of both a leisure centre and a central library, and urge the council to consider all suggestions to enable Crown Street Library and the Dolphin Centre to **continue to improve and evolve separately for the benefit of all current and future users**.

We believe the people of Darlington deserve to have the provision of a leisure centre and a central library. We already have these facilities in the Dolphin Centre and Crown Street and urge the council to consider all suggestions to enable each facility to continue to improve and evolve separately for the benefit of all current and future users.



Finally, as evidenced by the comments below, many respondents expressed anger and disappointment at the **perceived refusal and unwillingness of the Council**:

- to conduct a **fair consultation** in advance of any decision-making of the future of the library, **considering alternatives** to the relocation of Crown Street Library
- to **acknowledge** and act upon the opinions and suggestions of the **majority** of those responding to the consultation;
- to **preserve an important cultural and heritage site** in the town;
- and to **accept the existence of the covenant** protecting the building and provision of a library at Crown Street.

'I am extremely disappointed that the Council is ignoring the wishes of the taxpayers of Darlington in pushing ahead with plans to co locate the library with the Dolphin Centre with no clear cost analysis. Also, I believe the Council is not acting in a fair, honest and transparent way in respect of the covenant on the Crown Street Library building; there is ample documentary evidence that this covenant was put in place by the Pease family many years ago.'

'Darlington Library was purpose built and bequeathed to the people of Darlington, held in trust. It was never intended to be sold as a commercial enterprise, and the trust depended on the council to uphold this. Shame on the heads of Darlington Councillors who are willing to betray this trust!'

'I am strongly opposed to the Council's proposal to relocate the library to the Dolphin Centre. This historic building provides a characterful environment in which to promote lifelong learning. Its position is central in the town and its significance as a historic visitor attraction is crucial when promoting our town as 'genuine' place of

interest. Moving the library to the Dolphin Centre, in my opinion, will not enhance our town whatsoever and future generations will lose an important part of their town's heritage. More should be done to develop the library's appeal to visitors, including erecting more visible signage from Northgate and using the art gallery to its full potential.'

'It's a ridiculous idea to relocate the library, we have a fantastic library already that is part of our town's heritage and it is absolutely criminal to think of shutting down such a fantastic building. Also how is it going to fit in the Dolphin Centre? Maybe some of the funding cuts should come from cutting the top salaries at DBC instead of hitting the people of the town AGAIN'

'I believe that the library should be housed in the building that was gifted to the people of Darlington for exactly that. The building has architectural and cultural significance and should be a protected Heritage site that the council use to promote the town as well as provide for its residents. The swell of feeling in the town to keep [the library] where it is should not be ignored.'

'It is obvious from their stance that Darlington Councillors are not interested in culture []After reading their consultation document it appears to me to be lip service and they have already made their minds up.'

'Too much of this town's heritage has already been lost and every effort should be made and every avenue explored before any more of our buildings are disposed of. Apart from this, I think the plan to relocate the library to 3 separate area of the Dolphin Centre will be unsuccessful and will lead to a reduction in footfall to all but the quick pics section, especially local history with a separate entrance and most of the info not being readily available.'

Conclusion

The results of this survey reflect the views of a large number of residents of Darlington, representing the views of a wide range of individuals. The quotes included are examples which are representative of the almost 500 comments received through the survey. These, along with the associated statistics, highlight the strength of feeling of the residents of Darlington regarding the relocation of Crown Street Library. The Council is urged to use these results, give serious consideration to the alternatives suggested and to listen to the deeply held opinions of local people.

It is clear that Crown Street Library is a valued and important service for the people of Darlington. The vast majority of respondents are very satisfied with the library service at Crown Street and use it widely for a variety of activities and services. Open responses highlighted the appreciation of these services and concern around the reduction of services that would result from relocation to the Dolphin Centre.

Similarly, the majority of Dolphin Centre users reported that they would not be happy to see the proposed changes to the Dolphin Centre implemented, which would involve a reduction in facilities available and pressure on current services. These results highlight the wider impact of the relocation of Crown Street Library to the Dolphin Centre, on residents who use both or either of these services. Respondents also voiced concerns about the suitability of a leisure centre as a location for the central library.

Respondents were very positive about the potential for generating income through the development of alternative facilities and services at both Crown Street Library and the Dolphin Centre. For example, a café, book shop or exhibitions were popular options for development at Crown Street, and a bowling alley, spa facilities and a trampoline park were popular options for the Dolphin Centre. These results suggest that there is significant and positive potential for income generation and financial viability of both facilities, for which the public have an appetite. Many respondents expressed concerns about the costs associated with relocation of the library, and felt that more sustainable investments could be made to make savings and generate income long term, whilst maintaining and improving the current services, rather than reducing them.

Many respondents to the survey also expressed anger and disappointment at the perceived refusal/unwillingness of the Council: to conduct a fair consultation in advance of any decision-making of the future of the library, considering alternatives to the relocation of Crown Street Library; to acknowledge and act upon the opinions and suggestions of the majority of those responding to the consultation; to preserve an important cultural and heritage site in the town; and to accept the existence of the covenant protecting the building and provision of a library at Crown Street.

The vast majority of respondents (92%) agreed that the people of Darlington deserve to have the provision of both a leisure centre and a central library, and urge the council to consider all suggestions to enable Crown Street Library and the Dolphin Centre to continue to improve and evolve separately for the benefit of all current and future users.