

CROWN STREET LIBRARY TRUSTEES BOARD

23 October 2020

TRUSTEES PRESENT – Councillor Mrs Scott, Elizabeth Dodds, Yvonne Richardson and Matthew Roche (4)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson, Assistant Director Community Services; Mike Crawshaw, Head of Culture; Suzy Hill, Library Manager; and Luke Swinhoe, Assistant Director, Law and Governance. (4)

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR – IT WAS AGREED – That Councillor Mrs Scott be appointed as Chair of the Crown Street Library Trustees Board Meetings.

2. INTRODUCTIONS – The Trustees and officers in attendance at the meeting introduced themselves and in doing so gave a brief overview of their background and interest in the library provision in Darlington.

3. MARKING THE 135TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE OPENING OF THE CROWN STREET LIBRARY – The Assistant Director, Community Services stated that this year was the 135th Anniversary of the Opening of the Crown Street Library and that he had responsibility for the service and the building. It was reported that there were some exciting opportunities going forward to ensure it was preserved, restored and celebrated for the next 135 years. It was an important part of the town's history and it would contribute to the 200th anniversary celebrations of the railways, that were planned to take place during 2025.

Yvonne Richardson gave an overview of the history of the Library to the Board. The Library opened on 23 October 1885 (135 years ago) and the celebrations arranged to mark the opening lasted all day with residents being given the day off work with the various speeches that were given at the celebrations being reproduced verbatim in local newspapers. It was a great event for the town and it was officially opened by the daughter of Edward Pease.

Edward Pease campaigned for many years before his death in 1890 to have a library built in the town but he needed to obtain agreement from Darlington ratepayers to have 1p added to the rates to ensure that the Library was maintained after it was built and he left money in his will to ensure the building was built. The building is a beautiful unusual building; designed by GG Hoskins, a famous Darlington architect; built from pressed red brick from Grosmont, Nr. Whitby and red stone from local quarries; had a stone symbol above the original entrance which included the town motto, Borough Coat of Arms, Locomotion and the Pease Coat of Arms; stained glass dome in the entrance hall; ceilings made from glass which was a particular feature of the building; as well it being an important part of the streetscape and a regionally important building. The library had been a focus for social, educational and leisure pursuits in Darlington for 100 years and it had provided a focus for the town's historic and artistic activity. The library had played an important part in the cultural and social development of Darlington.

The anniversary provided a great opportunity to remember the gift that was made to the prosperity of the town, by the Pease family, for the betterment of the lives of the Darlington residents.

IT WAS AGREED – (a) That the thanks be conveyed to Yvonne Richardson for the background provided to the Library.

(b) That the Council's Communications Team be requested to promote the anniversary.

4. UPDATE - CROWN STREET LIBRARY – The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report (previously circulated) providing an update on the Crown Street Library.

The submitted report provided the background to the Library; stated that Edward Pease had left the sum of £10,000 in his will 'for the education of the poorer classes'; the executors of his estate commissioned the construction of a public library in Crown Street which opened on 23 October 1885; it was extended in 1900 and 1930; the building transferred to the 'Corporation of Darlington'; the Council held the building on trust for the purpose of being used as a public library; until March 2020 the Council was the sole trustee of the building which was reviewed when the Leader of the Council and three independent trustees were appointed as trustees of the Library building in March 2020; and that Cabinet approved the Terms of Reference for the Crown Street Library Trustee Board (also previously circulated).

Particular references were made to the proposed restoration works that were planned which included restoration of the roof; replacement of mechanical and electrical installations; structural repairs; new toilets and family change; internal decoration; and external lighting. It was reported that pre-planning consultation and engagement occurred on site and on-line at the beginning of 2020 with feedback being incorporated into the final scheme where appropriate; site investigation and survey work had been carried out; a planning application had been submitted in early September; it was planned that works would commence towards the end of 2020 with a completion date of late 2021; all works would be carried out would be sympathetic to the history of the building; and that alongside the refurbishment, interpretation would be introduced into the building to tell the story of the Library.

The Head of Culture reported that from the feedback that had been received from residents and visitors from the engagement exercise that had been undertaken the historic 'fabric' and heritage of the Library was important to them and any improvements needed to be sympathetic to this and accessibility needed to be improved. A number of other improvements were suggested including the provision of spaces for local history, family history, an art gallery, an area for the community to celebrate the history of the town and a quiet space to reserve. It was also felt important to modernise and introduce new concepts in order to encourage a new generation of visitors and users of the Library and engage with children and young people; cater for families from overseas; and provide a place to study.

A number of concept drawings were presented at the meeting building on the feedback received. It was reported that the original shelving would be retained as this was a key historical feature that needed to be kept; a number of options to improve accessibility were being explored in consultation with Historic England; ICT provision would be improved; and segregated zones would be introduced that would tell the story of Darlington and the Library in addition to a Teenage Zone, a junior area, local studies area, an historic reading room and dementia friendly areas.

Following the presentation the trustees raised concerns that the library may appear to be more like a museum than a library with the introduction of the history areas; regarding the challenges to making improvements to the entrance to the Library to make it more welcoming and inclusive; charging points to enable people to charge their own personal ICT equipment; the toilet provision; the amount of furniture in the concept drawing; the possibility of losing the flexibility to use spaces for other uses; and a café or refreshment provision. The Trustees welcomed the provision of the dementia friendly space; to the removal of the 'front' desk; and suggested the use of the 'treasure' in the archives for regular exhibitions. The Head of Culture and the Library Manager responded thereon.

IT WAS AGREED - That the report be noted.

5. PERFORMANCE OF THE LIBRARY – The Library Manager gave an update to the Board on the performance of the Library and in doing so welcomed the planned refurbishment and restoration works. It was reported that in 2019/20 there were 177,000 visitors to the Library, with visitor numbers remaining stable over the last three years; 250,074 physical books had been borrowed, which was a drop of six per cent on the previous year; and that digital library loans had increased by 97% from 12,416 in 2018/19 to 24,426 in 2019/20. There would be a notable drop in visitor numbers in 2020/21 due to Covid-19.

IT WAS AGREED – That the information be noted.

6. HOW THE LIBRARY SERVICE DEALT WITH CORONAVIRUS – The Library Manager stated that, following government advice, the Library had to close its doors on 17 March 2020, and from that time it was important to think differently in order to enable the service to continue. On-line membership was introduced and within six weeks 200 new members had signed up; uptake on digital borrowing increased by 208 per cent; to reduce feelings of isolation a home delivery service for residents aged 60 and over was introduced, with 250 households still continuing to use this service; a 1940's themed book of photographs and memories was designed, produced and delivered to Care Homes to enable residents and caregivers to discuss and reminisce together; weekly programmes of family activities were introduced; and the book trust which delivered quality reading / learning papers to 120 children in care was introduced.

The Library opened its doors on 13 July 2020 for quick pick book borrowing and returns; home delivery to 60's and over continued; from 28 September 2020 two computer workstations were made available to customers; the Centre for Local Studies was available for e-mail enquiries; Cockerton Library opened on part time hours; books and learning resources were supplied to around 250 children from lower income families; and incentives were introduced over the summer to keep children reading.

IT WAS AGREED – That the information be noted.

8. PLANS FOR 2020/21 – The Library Manager gave an update to the Board on the plans for 2020/21 which included the production of a video to mark the 135th Anniversary; formation of a digital book group; offering schools secure borrowing outside of library opening hours; extra support for primary schools; introduction of a trial challenge with schools; promoting the digital offer and the home delivery service; free book reservations; no fines being imposed; and continuing to adhere to guidance in respect of Covid-19.

Discussion ensued on the offer to primary schools and the need to advertise the service in order to encourage children to read as early as possible; the increased membership; and the on-line events.

IT WAS AGREED – That the information be noted.

9. THE LIBRARY SERVICE CONSULTATIVE GROUP – The Assistant Director, Community Services stated that prior to Covid-19, it had been agreed to establish a Library Service Consultative Group that would be kept informed and engaged with the library service. The suggested Terms of Reference were appended to the submitted report.

Following an initial session when the role of the group was explained eight people accepted the offer to be part of the group and act as advocates for the library. Once Covid-19 restrictions allow, the Library Manager will be in touch with those people to establish the Group.

IT WAS AGREED – That the position be noted.

10. ANY OTHER BUSINESS – The Library Manager showed the video that had been produced to the Board.

IT WAS AGREED – That the video be noted.