

CROWN STREET LIBRARY TRUSTEES BOARD

Friday, 22 October 2021

PRESENT – TRUSTEES - Councillors Mrs H Scott, Elizabeth Dodds, Matthew Roche and Yvonne Richardson.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Mike Crawshaw (Head of Leisure and Cultural Services), Suzy Hill (Library Manager), Luke Swinhoe (Assistant Director Law and Governance) and Lynne Wood (Elections Manager)

1 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS.

The Chair welcomed the Trustees and Officers in attendance to the second meeting of the Crown Street Library Trustees Board.

2 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING OF THIS BOARD HELD ON 23 OCTOBER 2020

IT WAS AGREED – That the Minutes be approved as a correct record.

3 PERFORMANCE AND OVERVIEW OF SERVICE - PRESENTATION

The Library Manager gave an overview of the Library Service to the Board and its performance over the last year, and in doing so, reported that it had been another difficult year, and that as result of Government advice and the re-introduction of restrictions due to Covid-19, the Library had closed its doors again, in March 2020, for three months. The library had re-opened in July on reduced hours initially for the 'quick pick' book borrowing service only and, acting on the advice given, furniture had been removed to provide space for people, personal contact had been kept to a minimum and 'dwell' time for customers had been reduced. The majority of the services were now accessible, however, the library had not been able to do as much engagement as it had done previously, as a cautious approach was being taken to ensure both staff and customers were safe.

As a result of the closures footfall, as expected, was down, to 28,295, which was only 16 per cent of the previous year's figures, however, as a result of the initiatives that had been introduced, there had only been a 40 per cent drop in physical issues. The initiatives that had been introduced had had a positive impact with the library reaching people in different ways through the introduction of the home delivery service; provision of curriculum boxes to schools; themed bags; the select and collect service; removal of fines; and by raising the profile of the library through the app, social media channels, leaflet distribution, etc. The pandemic highlighted the digital offer with more people accessing e-books together with online audio books, magazines and newspapers. The digital issues increased by 140 per cent which followed a 97 per cent increase in the previous year.

Once the library fully re-opened and it was possible to have visitors back into the building one of the initiatives that was brought back was the annual summer reading challenge. The challenge was done differently this year, due partly to the pandemic but also due to the expected disruption caused by the refurbishment works. Instead of taking part in the national summer reading challenge, the 'Reading Rollercoaster' was introduced, whereby

children were encouraged to borrow a book to have a chance of winning some amazing prizes. 2,300 entries were received with the Cabinet Member with the Children and Young People Portfolio hosting the prize giving event. Although there were less participants this year the children that did participate visited the library more often and were more engaged with the service.

To spread the word of the challenge a number of VIP readers were recruited in order to raise the profile of the library and the summer reading challenge; provide story times for families at home; and provide role models to encourage children to read and share books. Incentives were offered to children to read to camera which were uploaded to the library's Facebook page.

During the school year a further challenge was introduced entitled '100 Books to read before you are 11'. The 100 books were packaged to schools aimed at Year 5 children to read. Four schools took part in this challenge and schools were offered tickets for the Hippodrome as an incentive to encourage children to take part.

In respect of Adult provision, the course areas were reopened; in conjunction with a number of partners, 1:1 IT and Job Support was provided and reminiscence boxes were put together and were available to stir memories for adults in order to promote discussion. A modest refurbishment of Cockerton Library, which would be 50 years old this year, commenced in October and the refurbishment of Crown Street Library was planned to start shortly.

Trustees raised a number of questions including what the key initiatives would be post pandemic; how the library would adapt to get people back into the physical building; what work had been done to promote the services available in the rural areas; and highlighted the importance of encouraging children to read at an early age.

In response the Library Manager stated that the re-introduction of engagement activities were key to bringing visitors back to the building; should users prefer the home delivery service rather than visit the building this service would continue; the building refurbishment works were key to getting people back into the building; when the refurbishment works were happening staff would use that time to go into the community, including rural areas, to promote the library and its services; and outlined the services available to schools and children to keep them engaged and encourage them to read.

IT WAS AGREED – That the presentation by the Library Manager, on the performance of the service, be noted, and the thanks of the Board be conveyed to the Library Manager and her staff for their work over the last year.

4 VERBAL UPDATE ON REFURBISHMENT PROJECT

The Head of Culture gave an update to the Board on the refurbishment project for the Crown Street Library building. In providing the update it was reported that it had been hoped that the work would have been completed by now, however, as a result of a number of issues, one of which related to the scaffold design for the roof, this had not been possible. Following feasibility work with scaffolding and roofing contractors it had become evident that it would not be a straight forward exercise due to the design required for the roof;

complications relating to the glass that was inset in certain parts of the roof; proximity of the Sports Direct building which put limitations on scaffolding; road closures that were required for Crown Street; and the issues around the footpath not being able to take the load of the scaffold.

It was reported that tenders had now been submitted on a design that met the requirements of the structural engineer; it was expected that the work to erect the scaffolding would start in November; the programme of works would take between 12 and 13 months to complete; the road closure order required to enable the scaffolding to be erected would be published in October; and that consultation had taken place with the transport providers on the proposed closures.

Particular reference was made to the successful submission of a Round 1 bid for funding of just over £200,000 from the Arts Council Library Improvement Fund to supplement the budget for the work, which would, if successful, be used for digital infrastructure work and contributions to the reminiscence area.

Board Members in attendance at the meeting welcomed the provision of the reading room; the investment made by Darlington Borough Council in the building and the town's culture; requested that space be made available for the local studies resources and archives; and stated that the building would be more of an 'icon' for the town, particularly leading up to the 2025 bi-centenary celebrations marking the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. Particular references were made to sustainability plans and to information being made available in a report format in advance of future meetings, to enable greater consideration to be given to the issues in advance of the meeting. The Head of Culture responded thereon.

Following a request by one of the Board Members, the Towns Fund Programme Manager gave an update to the Board on other regeneration plans in the Town Centre that would have an impact and complement the work being undertaken on the Crown Street Library. It was reported that £1M of funds had been secured from the Towns Fund and that approximately 50 per cent of those funds had been spent on the Yards with the remaining money being spent on lighting enhancements; WiFi in the Town Centre; and acquisition of a property in Northgate, with plans to purchase a further two properties.

In addition to the Town Funds Programme, £22.3M of funding had been secured from the Town Deal Fund to fund a total of nine projects. Funding had been received for three of those projects, namely the Adult Skills Project in the Northern Echo building, the TLevels Project based at the College and the Skinnergate and the Yards Project, and an update was given on each of those projects at the meeting. Business cases were required for the further six projects, which included the Rail Heritage Quarter, Bank Top and Railway Scheme, North Road, Linear Park/Skerne Valley, Edward Pease House and Victoria Road, to enable the funding for those schemes to be released and for those projects to be progressed, the deadline for submission of those business cases was November 2021. Again an update on each of those projects was given at the meeting.

Particular reference was made to the proposed purchase of the former Northern Echo building on Crown Street, to be used as an Adult Skills facility, which would complement and

link in with the Crown Street Library, and to the stakeholder engagement that would take place as that project progressed.

It was reported that planning permission had been sought to demolish the former Sports Direct building, on the site to the rear of the library, and a number of early architect proposals for the site were shared at the meeting.

The potential opportunities around the Library building were welcomed by the Board and it was requested that the Trustees be updated, at opportune times, to enable them to have their input and that the links between the Adults Skills project and the library be developed, with a view to the Adults Skills project being seen as a possible extension of the services available at the library.

IT WAS AGREED – (a) That the report be noted.

(b) That reports be submitted to future meetings of the Board, and that those reports include information on how the Library would meet its environmental and sustainability targets.

(c) That Trustees be updated on the potential opportunities around the Library building at opportune times.

5 AOB.

No other business was raised at the meeting.