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SLOUGH LIBRARIES PUBLIC CONSULTATION RESPONSE

UNISON has a number of concerns it would like to raise in response to the Slough Libraries Public Consultation. These concerns are listed below.

Stock:

- We would like to see more detail on the proposed book fund and the proposed spend on e-resources. How are the reduced funds to be distributed? The book fund is very heavily skewed in favour of children's fiction (which is already cheaper than any other type of book), presumably as this issue well. Will the cuts impact even further on non-fiction and adult fiction?
- We were unable to identify a stock policy in the paperwork. Does the service have a basic policy on how stock is selected, how its evaluated and disposed of or replaced? How is this accounted for in the book fund? Have book donations also been considered?
- How is stock selected and distributed amongst branches? Is this done by supplier selection or do staff have input into the process?
- We appreciate one source of income is book reservations and this is likely to be through new publications. Has a cost-benefit analysis been done on waiting for paperback copies to be released and reducing the number of hardback fiction? Have shorter loan periods been explored? It would be good to see figures around hardback fiction take up and revenue from book reservations.
- How are eBooks and e-audio books selected? If the service is to be more reliant on e-resources, have the costs been explored? In the case of popular books, where publishers may limit the number of times a licence can be loaned, has the cost of buying more licences been considered?
- Slough are part of SELMS consortium, does the consortium also cover e-resources? If so, does this mean costs for fees, titles and licences are shared across the consortium? What impact does this have on savings?

- The proposal that eBooks are a solution to physical libraries being open seems to be based upon use during covid when borrowers had no alternative. It also doesn't take into account people who don't have a device to access them or who have no or limited internet access. Although e-resources can be more accessible to some readers with disabilities they do not suit everyone, and they only save money if they are well used.
- Looking at the library website, the e-resources do not seem well advertised, and the layout isn't as accessible as it could be. Making e-resources easily accessible should be a priority. It's all available via the library catalogue, so clearly marking this on the main page could make this clearer.

Staff:

- Staffing figures seem to be from 2019, is it possible to get up to date figures?
- The consultation paper does not seem to give a fair representation of what library staff actually do. The public often have a misconception that library staff just shelve, issue and return books, which makes 40 members of staff across 4 libraries seem quite high. However, outreach activities and regular rhyme times and children's events tend to be staff intensive and require preparation.
- UNISON would like to query if Slough do have 3 FTE librarians.
- Obviously, the majority of staff will be frontline, and we wouldn't expect to see more than one manager per branch, with maybe a couple of extra supervisors in the Curve to cover absence across the service. Do managers work on the public desks?
- With the information given, it does not seem that a random member of the public would be able to give a fair and informed opinion on library staffing.

Volunteers:

- UNISON would like to see a volunteer policy or any proposed. A Labour council should not have volunteers doing the work of paid staff and that should be clearly laid out from the start. Volunteers should not issue and return books, they should not shelve books, and they should not open or close libraries. Any volunteer work should be an enhancement and not a replacement for staff.
- UNISON would like to know more about the recruitment process for volunteers and what training they have. What checks are in place? It seems that volunteers are given access to personal data (via the library management system). What is done to ensure that library users are safe?
- A volunteer run library would still require building and IT maintenance as well as access to library materials so it's not likely to provide a huge saving.

Building and opening hours:

- Closing or reducing hours to a library when the nearest alternative is 20 minutes away by public transport will disadvantage elderly and disabled users, as well as mums with very young children, younger users, and anyone on low income. It's not clear from the EIA that the groups with protected characteristics are being properly consulted.
- The library service doesn't just issue books, it should provide a place to study, access to research materials and internet, and computer access. Reducing access to these things will be of greater detriment to the most disadvantaged residents.
- Open+ may allow staff-less libraries, but there are many potential H&S risks, and the system does not cater to under 18s who may struggle to travel to another branch. It also ignores the needs of library users who require social interaction or physical help to make use of the service. There is no explanation in the documents of how this would work or what the system is likely to cost.

Income generation:

- Library fines and fees don't provide a great deal of money and are viewed by many as a deterrent to library use. Large fees are more likely to lead to loss of expensive stock and debts are not actively pursued.
- What other forms of income have been explored? Has hire of buildings been maximised? Do library management apply for grant funding for events and projects? Have sale of local history prints or charges for research been explored? Do the libraries sell withdrawn stock and unwanted donations? A button for cash donations on the webpage? Are all events free or are some ticketed? Do they charge for materials for activities?

Thanks for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. We look forward to your reply.

Thomas Rhodes

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