Cumbria County Council Libraries Review

Public and stakeholder engagement overview report
Cumbria County Council Libraries Review:
Public and stakeholder engagement overview report

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Time for change?
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Executive summary

1. Reason for the review

The purpose of the review has been to consider whether alternative models of service provision have the potential to arrest or reverse the overall decline in use of libraries in Cumbria. This is within the context of a static budget, but with additional new budget pressures possible in future years.

2. Purpose of public and stakeholder engagement

The PSE programme ran between April and June 2011. Its objectives were:

a. Understand public views on most important aspects of a library service
b. Identify ideas for improvements to current library service
c. Understand public views in relation to new model of provision outlined by the council
d. Provide a response to issues and consider adapting proposals as appropriate

3. Level of public participation

Around 3700 people and organisations gave feedback on the council's proposals through a number different engagement strands, including:

• Consultation document feedback forms
• Drop-in sessions at all 48 libraries
• Rural libraries postal survey
• Telephone survey
• Focus groups
• Online discussion forum
• Children's feedback forms
• Hard to reach focus groups
• Discussions with Parish Councils
• Emails, letters and comments cards

4. Views on most important aspects of a library service

• Libraries are social spaces. They are not simply a place from which to borrow books.
• Books are important. Books remain far and away the most important reason people use libraries and the quality and range of the book stock is a key concern.
• Staff are highly valued. Their support and contribution is seen as adding real value to the service.
• Libraries are of particular value to children. They are seen as places to learn, exercise the imagination, build confidence and have fun.
• Libraries provide other resources. Access to computers, internet, photocopiers and other equipment is highly valued.
• People value “localness”. The proximity of libraries to people's homes is seen as a key strength.
• Mobile libraries meet a specific need. The fact that it allows people who, due to lack of transport or infirmity, would otherwise be unable to access a library to do so is central.

5. Ideas for improvements to current library service

• Opening hours are a universal concern. This was not simply a demand for longer opening hours. People were more interested in the opening hours being ‘right’, matching local needs better.
• Book stock is perceived as a weakness. There seems to be a general perception that the book offer has deteriorated over time and needs to be improved.
• Refreshments and furnishings make a difference. Introducing tea, coffee and comfy chairs could be one of the most popular improvements the council could make.
• Better marketing is needed. The perception is that the council’s efforts to market libraries is poor and needs to be improved.
• People recognise the benefits of shared services. It was argued that this could save money and help safeguard other local services.
• Libraries could be more dynamic. Libraries could do more to involve their local communities, either through outreach activity or opening up the library building for general community use.
• People value the DVD collections. There is dissatisfaction where this facility has been removed.
• The website could be improved. There are complaints that it is hard to navigate and the catalogue is not intuitive.
• Improve computer access. Increasing the number of computers available in libraries is a common request.
• Disabled access could be better. Particularly at smaller libraries
6. Views on ideas for changes to the library service

- Generally people are concerned about change and sceptical of the council’s intentions. But they are prepared to consider change when they understand the context.
- The Library Extra concept was viewed positively, with the caveat that they should not be to the detriment of the remaining parts of the service.
- Ideas for Cumbria Community Libraries receive a mixed response. Where they are assumed to be a replacement for existing branches they are generally seen as inferior. Where they a new service people are positive.
- Volunteers should support the service, not replace professional staff.
- Community Outreach Librarians are well received, and seen as necessary element of proposed changes.
- The 24/7 virtual library should be an addition, not a replacement for physical libraries. And the current online offer needs to be improved and publicised.
- Mobile libraries are highly regarded by users but exclude many others because of the times they visit villages.
- Book-drops and Library Links are popular in rural areas, amongst younger people and those who cannot currently access the mobile library service.

- There is a role for the virtual library. Despite a muted response the increasing use of the library website and the ubiquity of websites like Amazon suggest there is clearly a market that wants to access services online.
- People want evidence that changes will deliver better services; test projects in different areas could provide that evidence base.

8. Next steps

The council’s Cabinet is scheduled to consider this report at their meeting on 15 September. At that meeting they will agree the way forward for the libraries review.

9. More information

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Introduction

1.1 Cumbria County Council review of library services

Cumbria County Council's library service has seen incremental change over many years, including changes to services, opening hours and a limited number of closures. However, the basic model of provision, 48 static libraries supplemented by a mobile library service, has not changed significantly.

Over recent years libraries in Cumbria have recorded a steady decline in use. Since 2005 the number of items borrowed has dropped 18 per cent, and the number of visitors has dropped by 20 per cent. While there are branches which do not follow the trend, these are the exception.

It is this significant decline in usage that has prompted this review.

The review's aim has been to consider whether alternative models of provision have the potential to arrest or reverse this decline in use. This is within the context of a static budget, but with additional new budget pressures a possibility in future years.

To that end, following an internal review, a new outline model of provision was developed to be the subject of a public and stakeholder engagement exercise.

1.2 Public and stakeholder engagement

Public and stakeholder engagement (PSE) is a key element of the libraries review. Libraries are generally seen as a touchstone local service and any change is frequently met with public concern. The council therefore felt it would be essential to engage as many people as possible in a variety of ways prior to making any decisions about the future of the service.

As such the council has proposed two rounds of PSE in order to inform, seek views and give feedback to the general public and stakeholder organisations in Cumbria.

PSE objectives

This first round of PSE took place between the start of April 2011 and the end of June 2011 (with two elements taking place during July).

The objectives were:

- Understand public views on most important aspects of a library service
- Identify ideas for improvements to current library service
- Understand public views in relation to new model of provision outlined by the council, specifically:
  - Library Extras
  - Cumbria Community Libraries
  - Virtual libraries
  - Mobile libraries/rural library provision
- Provide a response to issues and consider adapting proposals as appropriate

PSE activities

The vast majority of PSE activities were delivered as an integrated plan between 11th April 2010 and 30th June 2011. Activities included:

- Press release and briefing
- Bespoke consultation website (providing information and encouraging online feedback via discussion forums)
- Publication of consultation document (including paper feedback form)
- Community drop-in sessions at all 48 libraries
- Rural libraries postal survey
- User/non-user telephone survey
- Two independently facilitated focus groups
- Children’s feedback forms
- Meetings with Parish Councils/Parish Council Associations
- Focus groups with specific hard to reach audiences
- Other public input including comments cards, emails and letters, petitions, ad hoc local discussion groups

1.3 PSE report

Purpose of this report

This report summarises the outputs from each engagement strand. See Appendix 1 for the methodology used to summarise all input received. The report seeks to capture key issues arising in relation to each objective, demonstrate how these issues are being responded to and reflect upon next steps for the libraries review.

Assessment of issues

All of the strands of engagement, with the exception of the two surveys, were designed predominantly to collect qualitative information. In terms of reporting this means looking at what was said and how strongly this came across from the various strands of engagement rather than assessing absolute numbers. This naturally involves a degree of judgement being used in interpreting findings from each engagement strand. However, the reporting process outlined in Appendix 1 was designed to ensure a consistent approach was taken. In terms of the council’s response to these issues, the emphasis is placed primarily on what was said rather than how many people said it.
2 Outline of PSE activities

2.1 Introduction

Engagement activity during the discussion phase from 11 April to 30 June aimed to engage a range of stakeholders in addressing the core objectives of the consultation, namely: to consider the current merits of the library service and suggestions for improvement, and give more specific feedback on the proposals put forward by the council. The following information giving and engagement activities were undertaken:

Information giving

- Media coverage
- Website
- Social media
- Direct mailings to community organisations
- Information for councillors and MPs
- Emails to members of the public and organisations

Engagement activities

- Official consultation document feedback forms
- 48 Library drop-in sessions
- Rural libraries postal survey
- Telephone survey
- Independent focus groups
- Discussion forum responses
- Children’s feedback forms
- Parish councils/council associations meetings
- Hard to reach focus groups
- Comments cards filled in at library branches
- Emails and letters direct to the communications team
- Petitions
- Other ad hoc public discussions

An outline of the methodology and coverage of each activity is given below.

2.2 Information Giving

Media coverage

The launch of the consultation period was marked with activity to engage the county’s media with the discussion. This aimed to ensure the media provided balanced and informed coverage with regards to the review.

A press release was accompanied by an invitation to a press briefing, which enabled journalists to put their questions direct to libraries and media staff.

During the discussion period a further two press releases were issued by the council, as well as two letters and one feature.

In total this activity generated 32 articles in the media. These included eight news articles with either a neutral or positive tone, and six with a negative perspective; ten letters on newspaper letters pages from members of the public (mainly negative in tone); three editorial comments and one MP’s column.

In the main media coverage focused on the idea of ‘cuts’ and libraries under threat. Arguably this coloured much of the subsequent public response, however where there was opportunity to explain the council’s thinking directly to people the response tended to be more considered.

Website

A dedicated website was set up in order to provide an overview of the current library service and details of the council’s proposals for change.

Opportunities for further involvement were advertised on the website, such as attending the public drop in events; holding a private discussion and send in responses; or sending feedback direct to the council via email or post.

During the consultation period there were 1946 unique visitors to the site who spent on average just under five minutes on the site each. On average there were 44 visits to the site each day.

Social Media

Information regarding the discussion was broadcast via the council’s Twitter account.

The council’s 17 tweets reached 1566 people and were retweeted a further 12 times by other people and organisations. Seven people tweeted independently regarding the discussion and the general value of libraries in the county.

Direct mailings to community organisations

The council produced a discussion booklet which gave information regarding the current libraries service, and outlined the council’s proposals for change.
This, along with publicity posters gave information about the many ways in which members of the public were able to get involved in the discussion. This aimed to encourage participation amongst non library users and members of the public who do not have internet access or read or listen to local media. When meeting dates were announced flyers were also produced and distributed widely. Information was sent to public buildings and community locations across the county, including:

- Libraries
- Community associations
- Connexions branches
- Multicultural Associations
- Disability Associations
- Village halls
- Council offices

Information for councillors and MPs
Information was sent to councillors and MPs in Cumbria in order to both invite their feedback and to encourage them to further spread information amongst their constituents. This included

- Internal communication with county councillors via email and information displayed at full council
- Letters to Cumbria's MPs
- Letters, consultation documents and posters to parish councillors in the post
- Email reminders sent to parish councillors via CALC
- An article in the county council's parish councillor newsletter, Local News and Views

Emails to members of the public and organisations
The council's Area Support Team contacted members of the public and organisations in the county for whom they have contact details to inform them of the discussion.

Due to costs this was done predominantly through email and at Neighbourhood Forum meetings which took place during the discussion period.

Emails were sent to 4,233 people in Cumbria through this channel.

2.3 Engagement activities

Official consultation document feedback forms

Process
The council produced an official discussion booklet which gave information about the library service, and the proposals for change. On the back pages, people were invited to give their feedback on the council's suggestions.

The booklet was specifically designed to encourage respondents address the proposals in turn through their responses, rather than giving a general overview of the things they liked and disliked about the current service. Braille, large print and audio versions of the document were provided on request.

People
13,000 copies of the discussion booklet were distributed widely around the county throughout the consultation period as described above.

Participation
524 people used the booklet to respond directly to the council, either by post or by handing their response to staff at library branches or drop in sessions.

Overwhelmingly responses were from existing library users: just ten people who responded through this channel were not currently library members.

A much higher percentage of women than men completed the paper booklet: 67 percent of respondents were female against 27 percent male (the remainder did not disclose their sex). 48 percent of respondents were aged between 55 and 74 years. Just 5 percent of respondents (26 people) were aged under 34.

Library drop-in sessions

Process
Public drop in sessions were held in all 48 branch libraries in Cumbria.

Members of the public were invited to ask questions and give their views on the proposals in depth. In some areas residents were invited to complete short surveys regarding their views on libraries.
Flyers were circulated widely in order to publicise the events – at libraries and wider community locations. Information was given through a press release, on the dedicated website and on twitter. Information was also sent direct to county and parish councillors, members of the website and those for whom the council’s Area Support Teams have contact information.

Members of the public were invited to participate in a number of ways.

Information was available from members of staff, via the discussion booklet, and in some libraries through large posters on the walls.

Residents could give their feedback by speaking directly to staff; by filling in and returning a copy of the discussion booklet or by posting a comment on the feedback board.

People

Drop-ins were facilitated either by Library or Area Support Team staff. Events were open to all members of the public.

Participation

In total 696 people participated across the 48 events. Attendance varied from two people in Wigton, to 50 in Frizington, with an average of 14 at each event.

Rural libraries postal survey

Process

The council ran a survey in order to better understand the views of the county’s rural residents about the mobile library service. The survey also aimed to get feedback on ideas for alternative service provision.

The survey was a stratified random household postal survey sent to residents in 19 villages visited by the mobile library. The selection of areas was intended to get a mix between east, west and south routes. A sample frame was created which included all addresses within one mile of the village centre.

In larger villages (Dearham Great/Little Broughton Holme Burton in Kendal Thursby) – 3485 households - one in five households were sampled. In other villages – 1739 households - every other household was sampled. The survey was posted to households with a covering letter and reply-paid envelope.

People

In total 1469 households were surveyed during the field work period which took place between 10 and 26 June 2011.

Participation

365 responses were received, giving a response rate of 25%. Respondents were predominantly older. An age profile for each individual village is not known, but on the basis of population statistics for Cumbria as a whole over 65s were over-represented in the achieved sample by a factor of almost two. Only seven responses were received from people under the age of 35. Women were also over-represented.

Telephone survey

Process

The council commissioned a telephone survey, to take place between 4 and 15 July. The survey aimed to gather the views of library users and non-users.

Members of the council’s citizen’s panel were used as a sample frame, and were called on their home phone number. The survey led into a question asking if respondents would like to take part in a subsequent focus group session.

People

The survey was carried out by an independent research company on the council’s behalf.

Participation

150 people completed the survey. Quotas were set to be representative in terms of age, gender and geography. The survey was intended to provide more quantitative data on use and attitudes towards libraries. While the sample size was relatively small, results will be indicative of wider public opinion.

Independent focus groups

Process

The council commissioned two focus groups to take place through an independent facilitator: one in Whitehaven and the other in Penrith. Both took place during July 2011.

The specific purpose of these groups was to gain an in depth understanding of public views in relation to new model of provision outlined by the council.

People

The focus groups were facilitated by an independent research consultant on the council’s behalf.
Participation
Attendees were recruited through the telephone survey. Ten residents were recruited to participate in each focus group. On the day, six participants attended the Whitehaven group and seven, Penrith. Participants were approximately 50:50 male to female and aged between 19 and 74 years old. Participants resided across Cumbria, to include: Carlisle, Penrith, Windermere, Warcop, Crosby Ravensworth, Cumwhitton, Egremont, Whitehaven, Cockermouth, Seascale and Frizington.

Discussion forum responses

Process
As well as giving information, the council’s dedicated website included a number of interactive elements which encouraged involvement by members of the public.

An online discussion forum invited visitors to the site to debate their views on libraries with other residents on a number of topics such as, the general role of libraries, the Libraries Extras proposals; 24/7 Virtual Libraries and so on.

Members of the public were also able to post their suggestions for improving the libraries service and other people were able to vote and comment on these suggestions.

The site was promoted through media releases and briefings; community events in each Cumbria library; direct communication with county and parish councillors and MPs; emails to public via Area Support Teams; information displayed in libraries, village halls, connexions etc; information on the schools portal and communication with county council staff.

People
The site was moderated by the council’s communications team with input from library staff when required.

Participation
The site attracted 1946 unique visitors. Of them 106 chose to become members of the site. 51 people actively participated in the discussion forums, posting 157 times. 33 people posted ideas or commented on other's suggestions. 3 people emailed directly to the site inbox.

Children’s feedback forms

Process
A paper feedback form was designed to capture the views of younger children. The form was made available to all libraries and librarians were relied on to distribute the form and encourage children to respond. Moorclose library made use of standard comments cards for the same purpose.

Children were supported to complete the forms and asked to think about what they most liked about the library and how they thought it could be made even better.

People
Young people who attended all branch libraries in Cumbria were invited to respond by librarians.

Participation
286 feedback forms/comments cards were received from the following libraries:

- Ambleside
- Askam
- Barrow island
- Dalton
- Distington
- Kendal
- St Bees
- Ulverston
- Walney
- Longtown
- Harraby
- Moorclose
- Frizington

59 responses were from boys and 73 were from girls, the remainder did not specify. Respondents were aged between 4 and fourteen years old.

Engagement with specific groups

Process
Library and Area Support staff contacted a number of parish councils and ‘hard to reach’ groups in Cumbria to request their involvement in the libraries discussion.

On the whole this took the form whereby council staff attended pre-organised meetings held by these groups and gave an overview of the purpose of the review. Attendees were then invited to give their thoughts on the service currently, their ideas for improvement and their thoughts on the council’s proposals for change.

Discussions took place between 21 March and 5 July 2011.
People

Discussions were held with the following groups:

- One library user group: Barrow
- One disability group: Carlisle Local Access Forum
- Two youth groups: Feature Youth Group in Ulverston and Arnside Youth Club (20 people aged 8-11 and 20 aged 11-16)
- One multicultural group: a BME women’s group in Barrow (12 people)
- Six groups of the general public: Salterbeck Residents’ Association; friends of Tebay Church; residents at Bolton Exchange (16-25 people)
- Three Women’s Institutes: Patterdale; Caldbeck; Crosby Ravensworth and Lyvennet
- Five older people’s groups: Uldale Lunch Club; Lamplugh Senior Citizen’s Committee (four people); Wasdale elderly church meeting; Age UK Egremont (one person); Culgaith Exchange
- Six parish councils / council associations: Eden CALC 12 April, Askham Parish Council 8 June, South Lakeland CALC 9 June, Copeland CALC 21 June, Seaton Parish Council 22 June, Eden CALC/Local Committee 5 July.
- In addition two letters and 27 emails were received from parish councils.

Respondents were a mixture of library users and non users.

Participation

Attendance at the hard to reach focus groups varied from one person in Egremont to around 55 at Arnside Youth Club.

Likewise the depth of response varied, from those who wished to engage in detail with the proposals, to those who did not use libraries or read and did not feel in a position to give detailed responses.

Parish councils and council associations in particular chose to engage in depth with the council’s suggestions for change.

Other public input

Based on the information disseminated around the county, some people chose other more ad hoc methods through which to give their views.

- 766 people posted brief comments on boards in branch libraries
- 117 people sent emails directly to the council. Organisations such as charities were strongly represented in this group.
- 6 people sent letters direct to the council.
- Ad hoc discussions were held with residents in Shap coffee shop (four people); Shap Spanish class and Shap playgroup
- Petitions were received for the continuation of Distington and Askam in Furness libraries and Burton-in-Kendal mobile library. In total 692 people signed petitions.

On the whole respondents through these channels chose to give their general views regarding the merits and drawbacks of the current library service, and suggest improvements, rather than address the council’s specific proposals for change.

2.4 Summary of participation

In total around 3744 people and organisations were engaged through the various strands of the consultation through a variety of channels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strand</th>
<th>Level of participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Official consultation document feedback forms</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 Library drop-in sessions</td>
<td>696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural libraries postal survey</td>
<td>365</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone survey</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent focus groups</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion forum responses</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s feedback forms</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to reach focus groups including parish councillors</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other public input</td>
<td>1583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3744</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Understand public views on the most important aspects of a library service

3.1 Overview

The starting point for this review was to try and increase the use of the Cumbria’s libraries. To ensure that any change to services does not have a contrary effect it was important to understand what elements of the current library service are most valued by service users. This understanding will help shape the council’s plans as it moves forward.

Participants in all engagement strands dealt with this objective, indeed frequently it was the main focus of their response to the council’s proposals.

An analysis of the responses to this question and any other relevant points is given below.

3.2 Points arising from PSE

A remarkably consistent set of elements emerge from the various strands of engagement.

Libraries are social spaces
Respondents repeatedly mention the importance of libraries as social spaces with a focus on community interaction. They are not simply a place from which to borrow books. This sense of the library building, the actual physical space, acting as some kind of community hub or focal point is generally highly valued. This point is made by a range of different library users, young and old. This is enhanced where libraries are able to provide a range of facilities and community events.

Books are important
It may seem to go without saying but books remain far and away the most important reason people use libraries and the quality and range of the book stock is a key concern. And despite widespread internet access reference books remain important to a significant number of library users.

Staff are highly valued
The quality of library staff is frequently highlighted. They are generally described as helpful and friendly. Their support and contribution is seen as adding real value to the service. This is particularly the case where librarians have been able to build relationships with individual users, for example on the mobile library service.

Libraries are of particular value to children
The importance of libraries for children was stressed, both by adults and by children themselves. They are seen as places to learn, exercise the imagination and build confidence. The services offered for children, such as story time sessions, are highly valued. The value of being able to physically browse, pick up and feel books when children are increasingly accessing ‘virtual’ resources online was seen as crucial and a great way to encourage learning.

Libraries provide other resources
Access to computers, internet, photocopiers and other equipment is highly valued and a key reason many people use the library. DVD rental is also a highly regarded service.

People value “localness”
The proximity of libraries to people’s homes is seen as a key strength. It means people without transport (either their own or because of a lack of suitable buses) are able to access the service. Children in particular seemed to value “localness” as it meant that they were not dependent on their parents taking them to the library.

Mobile libraries meet a specific need
Those that use the mobile library value it for its convenience and ease of access. The fact that it allows people who, due to lack of transport or infirmity, would otherwise be unable to access a library to do so is central. Even for those with their own transport it allows them to avoid sometimes relatively long journeys to access the service.
4 Identify ideas for improvements to current library service

4.1 Overview

Understanding how people would like the service to improve should be an important consideration of any proposals aimed at increasing library use. Again participants in most engagement strands dealt with this objective.

An analysis of the responses to this question and any other relevant points is given below.

4.2 Points arising from PSE

A very wide range of specific suggestions for improvements are made by respondents. These have been collated into the broad descriptions below.

Opening hours are a universal concern

The issue of opening hours came through strongly in all strands. This was not simply a demand for longer opening hours, though this suggestion was made. Broadly people were more interested in the opening hours being ‘right’, in other words matching local needs better. In the main opening later in the afternoons and evenings was viewed positively, being seen as better meeting the needs of a working population. School children in particular complained about the limited opening hours available after school meaning their visits frequently felt rushed. Consistency of opening hours was also raised as an issue with the variation in opening times on different days of the week being highlighted. In terms of Sunday opening there was a degree of ambivalence, with as many opposed as in favour.

Book stock is perceived as a weakness

There are repeated requests for the range of books to improve and for titles to be rotated more regularly. While there were specific requests for more of a particular type of book this issue is usually raised in general terms. There seems to be a general perception that the book offer has deteriorated over time and needs to be improved.

Refreshments and furnishings make a difference

Introducing tea and coffee facilities in libraries could be one of the most popular improvements the council could make; children in particular highlight being able to have a ‘snack’ when they visit the library as something they would like. This suggestion is often accompanied by suggestions to provide couches, comfy chairs and better decoration. While there are clearly those who still value the library as a quiet space, a more café like environment would be viewed positively by most.

Better marketing is needed

There is a clear message about the marketing of libraries and the range of services and facilities available through them. The perception is that the council’s efforts to market libraries is poor and needs to be improved. People refer to relatively simple things such as ‘in-window’ and ‘on-street’ signage as well as suggesting that the public is generally unaware of how much libraries offer. There were several suggestions for a county-wide marketing campaign.

People recognise the benefits of shared services

There were numerous suggestions to bring other services into library buildings (or to co-locate libraries in other buildings), the caveat being that they must retain their ‘library feel’. It was argued that this could save money and help safeguard other local services.

Libraries could be more dynamic

There is a relatively common view that libraries could do more to involve their local communities, either through outreach activity or opening up the library building for general community use. This ties in with the idea for libraries offer more events and activities, for example author/illustrator talks and theme days.

People value the DVD collections

The availability of DVDs to rent was viewed positively and there is dissatisfaction where this facility has been removed. People complain of now having to travel to access this service.

The online offer could be improved

There is general criticism of the libraries service website, its interface and the services available through it. There are complaints that it is hard to navigate and the catalogue is not intuitive. There are also suggestions to introduce wi-fi in libraries.

Improve computer access

Increasing the number of computers available in libraries is a relatively common request.

Disabled access could be better

Disabled respondents commented on accessibility issues preventing them (or discouraging them) from using libraries other than the main Carlisle library.

Other issues related to this topic

Through the telephone survey it was possible to ask non-users of the library service directly about whether there were
improvements to the service that would encourage them to use it. Overwhelmingly the answer was no, in other words their non-use of libraries was not related to the quality of the offer. Rather it was simply a function of their lack of interest, time or preference for buying their own books. The relatively small sample means that this finding should be treated with some caution.

5 Understand public views in relation to new model of provision outlined by the council

5.1 Overview

In its consultation document the council published outline proposals for significant changes to the way the library service operated. These included creating around 30 Library Extras in the main towns and villages, supported by Cumbria Community Libraries in locations currently served by smaller libraries (with the potential for Community Libraries in new sites too). In addition there were suggestions to improve and develop the virtual library offer available via the internet and consider changes to mobile library provision.

Overall it would be fair to say that the proposals were met with a high degree of scepticism about the council’s intentions, with many viewing them as an attempt to cut services. As a result many people were opposed to significant change (preferring the status quo plus some improvements). Perhaps because of this people were sometimes reluctant to engage in detail with the council’s proposals.

In the two focus groups where respondents were asked to consider all the council’s proposals as a package, rather than discrete changes, there was a general view that the proposed model had the potential to improve the service and increase usage if implemented correctly. On the other hand there was also the view that if done badly the changes would dilute the quality of the service and reduce usage further. Because of this it was considered essential to pilot these changes before a countywide implementation.

5.2 Points arising from PSE

The feedback on each of the main elements of the council’s proposals is discussed below.

Library Extras

The vast majority of feedback on Library Extras came from the paper feedback forms, emails and two targeted focus groups. Overall the concept was viewed positively, with the caveat that the development of Library Extras should not be to the detriment of the remaining parts of the service (although many respondents saw Library Extras as effectively the same as the current provision in main towns).

Library Extras were seen as suitable for larger centres of population, but it would be necessary to ensure there was an equal geographic spread across the county. It was suggested that they had the potential to attract new users to the service and encourage increased social interaction.
Suggestions for basic elements of the service included:

- Excellent book stock
- PC and internet access
- DVD/CD rental
- Local information provision
- Newspapers and magazines
- Children’s activities
- Excellent staff

Evening and Saturday opening hours were viewed as important but there was more ambivalence about Sunday opening.

The concept of shared services was viewed positively with a variety of suggestions including police, Citizens Advice, job centres and health, education and public transport.

The notion of commercial sponsorship was also raised as a potential way to generate funding.

Buildings themselves should be spacious, light, bright and easily accessible. There was willingness to consider moving from current premises if benefits could be demonstrated. Both focus groups argued that there should be a pilot implementation programme to demonstrate the concept works before a countywide roll out.

Cumbria Community Libraries

The Cumbria Community Library idea was loosely defined in the consultation document with a range of examples given:

- Library Links – where a library service is provided from a local shop or community centre using self-service machines
- Local volunteers taking over the running of the library with support from the council
- Book drops – simply a selection of books, delivered to a central location, maybe a village pub or even a petrol station, and regularly restocked with new titles

The suggestion in the consultation document was that this type of provision could replace the current provision in smaller villages, but with the potential to also consider adding Community Libraries in new locations.

Views on the concept were mixed.

Generally speaking respondents who currently used a library that could become a Community Library viewed the proposal negatively, seeing it as an inferior service. There was particular concern about the loss of a dedicated library building, the diminution of book stock and the possible loss of professional staff. The potential to increase the opening hours of a Community Library, either because of co-location in another building or through the use of volunteers was not seen as a sufficient trade-off. There were also concerns expressed about leaving current library buildings empty and many people suggested that there was not a suitable building where they lived. A common attitude could be summed up as “good idea, but not right for here”.

However, as an additional service in locations not currently served by a library the response was positive and people were willing to consider different options for service delivery depending on the circumstances of that location – numerous different potential locations were suggested.

Good book stock, computer/internet access, DVDs/CDs, local information and space to sit, chat and read were frequently mentioned as core elements of the offer at community libraries.

The role of volunteers and the notion of them running libraries prompted debate. Where volunteers were in addition to paid staff this was viewed positively but there was little support for volunteers to replace them. Key concerns were loss of specialist knowledge, lack of commitment and lack of sustainability in the longer term. Some also objected to the notion of volunteering in principle, seeing libraries as a core public service that should be fully funded by the state. Some suggested that for the use of volunteers to be sustainable the council may have to consider incentivising it in some way. The idea of commercial sponsorship was also raised in relation to community libraries.

That said many respondents expressed an interested in getting involved with the library service as a volunteer in some capacity.

The concept of the Community Outreach Librarian however was almost universally seen as a positive idea, playing a key role in supporting any volunteers and ensuring Community Libraries developed as vibrant local resources. A recurrent theme was the idea of libraries being ‘de-personalised’, the role of the Community Outreach Librarian was a seen as a necessary safeguard against that.

24/7 virtual libraries

The notion of the virtual library provoked mixed reactions. Many people objected on the grounds that not everyone has access to the internet, or that it could not replace the physical experience of a library. Indeed several commented that the development of online services should not be to the detriment of ‘real’ libraries.
However, where people understood the virtual library as part of a package, rather than a replacement for the physical library, people were much more positive and could see how useful the service could be in terms of broadening access. There was a lot of discussion about e-books, particularly on the discussion forum. The option to download e-books was viewed positively but a range of practical problems were acknowledged. Other services that were seen as useful were the ability to search for and reserve books, renew books, and potentially order books for home delivery.

There was also the suggestion that the website should offer more of an online community, with the ability interact with other library users.

It was notable that almost all references to the council’s current online offer were critical, particular the ease of navigation around the site. Improving the online offer was noted as necessary for ideas like Book-Drops and Library Links to work properly.

It was also apparent that the services available online currently did not seem well known and even many library users expressed surprise that certain facilities, for example renewing books, was already something that could be done online.

Mobile/rural library provision
The feedback from the majority of the engagement strands shows the mobile library service to be generally regarded as important and providing a valuable service to rural communities, those who are housebound and those without access to public/private transport. People tend to be relatively uncritical of the service. Those who use the service are overwhelmingly positive about it and are only critical of the frequency of stops and the unreliability of the vehicles. Many claim that is the only way that they can easily access a library service and highlight the importance of the social side of using the library.

However, the rural library postal survey engagement strand was designed to explore this more fully and asked people to consider mobile libraries alongside alternatives types of provision such as the Library Link or Book-Drop. The survey showed that almost three quarters of respondents were non-users and that one in five had not been aware that the mobile library stopped in their village. The non-use of the library van was predominantly due to the times it visited during the day. Only a minority were not interested in the service at all.

When asked to indicate which type of provision (mobile/library link/book drop) offered the best mixed of quality, ease of access and value views were split between users and non-users, with the latter group significantly more likely to view Library Links and particularly Book-Drops more positively.

A similar pattern emerged between older (65+) and younger (under 65) respondents, with younger respondents clearly more likely to favour the alternatives (for example while 59% of over 65s preferred the mobile library, only 30% of under 65s thought it was the best option).

Those who favoured the alternatives however were clear that these services would have to be proactively managed and developed to ensure they provided a good quality service. Several of those in favour of alternatives noted the potential for these to become a social focal point in smaller communities if the necessary support was in place. There were again suggestions to consider commercial sponsorship or tie-ins with other mobile services such as mobile banking.

Feedback from other engagement strands also suggested that there was potentially an appetite for the alternative types of provision in some communities; Parish Councils in particular were often keen to explore the potential for these types of services in their communities.
6 Discussion of implications for council’s proposed model of service delivery

6.1 Overview

There has been a significant level of engagement from the public on this issue, and while some of that engagement has been relatively superficial the strength of feeling around libraries is clear. However, through this exercise the council has heard overwhelmingly from current library users, who it may be argued are by definition comparatively satisfied with the current service. Additionally, where this information has been recorded, respondents have tended to be older, predominantly over 60 years old. This response is not surprising given it is service-users who are most likely to be concerned about changes to services and older people are particularly likely to use library services. In this sense the feedback has provided a lot of information about how not to alienate current users but comparatively less about how to attract new users.

That said there are interesting implications for the council’s proposals stemming from this feedback.

6.2 Points arising from PSE

Some current proposals may risk reducing library use

It is relatively clear that those who use the county’s smaller libraries do so because it suits them best. They value the convenience of a local service and sense of the library as a local social space. They are generally complimentary about the services on offer and are either unable or unwilling to travel to larger libraries despite their better opening times and better range of books and services.

If smaller libraries were to be replaced by a basic Local Link type service some of the key elements of the current service could be lost, namely a physical library space where people can sit, chat and socialise and access a wide range of books. The feedback suggests that this would not be popular and would be unlikely to attract the same level of use as currently. In addition, despite the improvements offered through the Library Extra concept, people may be unlikely to migrate to using larger libraries further away (if they want to use larger libraries they already are). Additionally it is not clear from the feedback received that such changes would attract new users to the service.

An implication of this feedback is that the net effect of these changes could be to reduce overall use of the library service, contrary to the review’s aims.

Changes to the county’s smaller libraries are more likely to be viewed positively, or embraced, if they manage to retain the most valued aspects of the current service discussed above and where a clear case for changes delivering better access and better value can be made. This can be seen the levels of use of current Library Links at Broughton and Coniston.

The potential for more of these types of arrangement was a theme in discussions with community groups and Parish Councils. In particular there may be an opportunity to use the revival of village halls (fed by Lottery funding and an influx of retired professionals capable of supporting their management) by using their social spaces as the basis for of a version of a Library Link which can replicate the atmosphere of the smaller staffed library but placing the emphasis on this coming form within the community. It would be important to work on a case by case basis when considering changes.

The Library Extra concept needs to be defined better

Broadly speaking the feedback suggests that people did not ‘get’ the Library Extra concept, viewing it as effectively the same as what is currently offered at larger libraries. The improved offer would need to be more clearly defined for people to be willing to consider it an acceptable trade off for changes at smaller libraries.

Mobile libraries present a dilemma

Mobile libraries are very highly regarded by the people that use them and generally seen as a ‘good thing’ by almost everyone. But only a small number regularly use them and the way the service currently operates inevitably excludes a large number of potential users.

The alternative ideas for rural library provision, Library Links and Book-Drops, are generally viewed positively by younger people (under 65s) and those not currently able to access the mobile service – suggesting there is potentially an untapped market of new users.

However moving to these types of service (given it is unlikely to be possible to offer an alternative service in all 500+ locations currently visited by the mobile library) would mean losing what users consider the key strength of the mobile service, namely the ease of access to those without transport/unable to travel.
If it was decided to stop the mobile library service the impact could be mitigated through increasing awareness and use of the home delivery service, additionally the development of the alternative types of provision would benefit from development work by a Community Outreach Librarian. Again change without being able to demonstrate a better value and viable alternatives would be likely to generate significant opposition in affected communities.

There is a role for the virtual library
The muted response to the idea of the 24/7 virtual library is arguably the result of the prejudices of respondents who see it as a distraction from ‘real’ libraries. However, the increasing use of the library website and the ubiquity of websites like Amazon suggest there is clearly a market that wants to access services online. There are a range of developments that could be considered:

- Improve the awareness and ease of use of the online facilities currently available, including the online catalogue
- Develop the capacity to download e-books onto handheld devices like Kindles.
- Develop systems to allow people to order books for home delivery or as part of a Book-Drop or Library Link service.

Testing changes is sensible
There is scepticism both about the council’s intentions and the likelihood of proposed changes actually improving the library service and increasing use. People would be more willing to accept change if there was clear evidence that it would be beneficial. Because of this the idea of testing changes in particular areas is recommended. This could provide the evidence people would expect.

Reasons for decline in use are unclear and attracting new users may be difficult
This work has not explained why library usage has dropped so significantly over the past several years. Although there is some suggestion that users feel the quality of the service overall has deteriorated incrementally over time, for example in the range of books available or opening hours. Non-users are very unlikely to identify specific issues with the current service (ie quality, opening times, books) as reason for their non-use, the majority are non-committal or mention lack of time/interest or a preference to buy books. There is not a strong sense that changes to the service would attract significant numbers of new-users, but there may be potential to re-engage with those who have only stopped using the service in recent years.

7 Demonstrate that public input has led to real changes
This consultation feedback report was considered by Cumbria County Council’s Cabinet, alongside a report from the Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Local Services and Corporate Director – Adult & Local Services, at their meeting on 15 September 2011.

That cover report can be viewed at http://tinyurl.com/699n99a

The report from the Cabinet Member and Corporate Director made the following recommendation that was accepted by Cabinet:

“That Members endorse the range of proposals contained in this report and specifically endorse the approach advocated, i.e. to work on a localised basis with Local Committees in the development of projects to modernise the Library Service and to receive subsequent recommendations for Cabinet decision making. Wherever and whenever possible these projects are to be required to take full account of opportunities to work across the County Council’s Directorates (and beyond) in order to ensure that the County Council and its partners are able to deliver modern responsive customer focused services but in the most cost effective and efficient manner possible.”

The recommendation reflects the feedback that was received during the consultation that a once-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate for Cumbria given the diversity of communities in the county. Hence there is a commitment to work on an area by area basis with local communities and local councillors to identify and implement changes that will work in each local area.

These projects will offer a “proof of concept” for some of the ideas that were proposed in the consultation document. This recognises the scepticism of some respondents about whether these new ideas would work.

The projects will aim to develop and nurture a number of emerging ideas and themes for the modernisation of service delivery including:

- The Library Link and Book Drops— a means of providing isolated communities with cost effective, consistent and increased access to library services;
- The Community Librarian – a method of taking library services out into the heart of communities, targeting hard-to-reach and disadvantaged groups, building up the use of and support for libraries.
• The Friends Group – a means of harnessing local support for libraries to enhance local provision, encourage greater participation and advocate for libraries, books, reading and related activities in the wider community;

• The Village or Community library – an initiative designed to test out the validity and practicality of a return to the idea of the village reading room, organised by the local community for the local community under the sponsorship of the County Council.

Additionally there is an intention to identify opportunities to share premises with other local partners and other county council services. The principle behind this was supported by many respondents to the consultation. Those who were opposed were generally concerned by the potential loss of dedicated library spaces. We recognise this and fully intend to ensure that libraries still feel like libraries. But the council cannot ignore its responsibility to try and make sure the service, and the council generally, makes the most efficient use of its resources.

Finally, recognising what were consistent themes in the feedback we received we will look at a number of initiatives including:

• Greater and more consistent public promotion of the range of services on offer;
• Regular review of local opening hours;
• Improvement of the range of on-line services (including the introduction of downloadable audio books);
• The development of proposals for in-house shops and cafes on a number of sites; and
• The limited re-introduction of DVD rentals to libraries (where this will fill a gap in the market).

There will be further local consultation and engagement as proposals for local areas are developed and we would encourage you to get involved and help shape your local services.
Appendix 1: Reporting methodology

Strand reports
For each strand of engagement, the member of the review team responsible for analysing input produced a strand report as follows.

a. Official consultation document feedback forms – Alex Mounsey
b. Library drop-in sessions – Lorraine Smyth
c. Rural libraries postal survey – Kieran Barr
d. Telephone survey – Kieran Barr
e. Independent focus groups – Helen Bidwell (external consultant)
f. Discussion forum responses – Alex Mounsey
g. Children’s feedback forms – Kieran Barr
h. Comments cards filled in at library branches – Kate Stark, John Ballard, Kieran Barr
i. Emails and letters direct to the communications team – Alex Mounsey
j. Petitions – Kieran Barr
k. Other ad hoc public discussions – Alex Mounsey
l. Parish councils/council associations meetings – Alex Mounsey, Bruce Bennison
m. Hard to reach focus groups – Alex Mounsey

Strand reports aimed to capture the issues raised in the particular strand of engagement under consistent headings to allow for easier compilation into the overview report.

Sense checking
Each strand report was considered by the wider Library Review team at their meeting on 28 July. Team members were asked to sense check the contents of the strand reports against their direct experiences of contact with the public during the review.

Team members fed back comments, queries and amendments to Kieran Barr.

Overview Report
All of the strand reports were then used to produce the draft Overview Report, which went back to the Library Review team before being sent to the Corporate Director Adults and Local Services for signoff and submitted for consideration at Corporate Management Team and Cabinet.
Appendix 2: Libraries review core consultation document