

THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA
CABINET AND CORPORATE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
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SCRUTINY OF EQUALITIES – LIBRARIES VISIT

This paper sets out the recommendations of the Cabinet and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee arising from a recent visit to Brompton and Kensington Central libraries as part of the ongoing Scrutiny of Equalities review.

FOR DECISION

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 On 23 March 2011, Councillor Carol Caruana and Councillor Gerard Hargreaves visited Brompton Library and Kensington Central Library as part of the Scrutiny of Equalities review, which falls under the remit of the Cabinet and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee. Also in attendance were Clair Bantin, Scrutiny Manager, Angela Chaudhry, Corporate Equalities Officer, and Elaine Chumnerly, PPU Office Manager.
- 1.2 The tour of both libraries was conducted by Sue Cornish, Principal Librarian: Partnerships, Equalities and Volunteers, with assistance from other library staff responsible for running a variety of projects. The tour concluded with an interview with Jayne Battye, Head of Library Services, who answered Members' more general questions about the overall service and development plans.
- 1.3 This paper sets out findings and recommendations arising from the visit.

2 BROMPTON LIBRARY

2.1 Overview

Brompton is very much a community library serving a core group of local residents. The library reopened in May 2010 following an

extensive refurbishment. It is the second library, after Chelsea, to go live with the self-service system. Although there were some inevitable minor problems with readers getting used to the new arrangements, these have since been resolved and service users now report high levels of satisfaction with the library.

2.2 Layout and design

The refurbishment of the library brought many changes to the physical layout inside the building. All parts of the library remain accessible for wheelchair users and readers using other mobility aids and ease of movement around the building has improved.

There is an accessible toilet and a stair lift to assist in accessing the training and conference rooms upstairs. The self-service machines are also designed to be at a suitable height for wheelchair users

2.3 Facilitating communication

Brompton Library has a large collection of audio and large print books, which ensures a significant proportion of the library stock is accessible to readers with visual impairments. The library does not stock books in Braille due to a lack of demand for this service.

Digital signage, designed using the appropriate colours and contrasts to make it easy to view, is available and gives details of activities, workshops, closures or changes to normal library services and other information, such as reading suggestions. The digital signage is coordinated across various Royal Borough libraries from a central computer.

There is a large collection of foreign language books and newspapers and a collection of skills for life books. Information leaflets about the library and its services are also produced in all the main languages spoken in the borough.

A list is kept of all languages spoken by staff so that the relevant person can be contacted if a service user who does not speak English requires assistance. This list, which is due to be updated following recent changes resulting from the restructure, includes staff members working in other libraries in the borough who can provide translation services by telephone. Library staff are also aware of the central translation and interpretation services offered by the Council.

Training in sympathetic hearing is available to library staff to enable them to better engage with deaf or hard of hearing service users.

However, no induction loop is present within the library as it interferes with other electronic devices.

2.4 IT

Brompton Library staff are conscious of the differing levels of IT competence amongst their service users and offer a high level of support and assistance, as required.

There are approximately fifteen computers in the IT area and due to high demand they are in almost constant use. Computers can be booked in advance or used on a drop-in basis if available. People can also bring in their own laptops and use the free wifi without booking. Service users are charged for any printing.

The SuperNova access suite is installed on one PC in every library. This system magnifies the text and adjusts colour and contrast settings to assist visually impaired users. All staff receive training on SuperNova and the accessibility features in Windows.

Additional computers on the first floor of the library have specially designed keyboards, for example, right and left side keyboards for people who have had strokes and ABC / symbol keyboards for users with learning difficulties.

2.5 Home Library Service

The Home Library Service, based at Brompton, supports approximately three hundred readers. Through the Home Library Service individual readers can select and reserve books to be delivered to their door and collected and returned to the library. The service supports readers who have disabilities or who are recovering from illnesses or operations, who find it difficult to visit the library in person for any number of reasons.

The user group ranges in age from 42 to 104 and, although the majority of service users are women, there is a fairly large and growing group of men also using this service. Staff reported that currently there is capacity to support up to a maximum of 375 readers, although this might involve reducing the amount of individual attention currently given to some readers.

Home Library Service staff visit readers roughly once a month and flexibility is built into the system. There are no late fines and service users can borrow more books and keep them for longer than other library users. The books and media available covers all formats, including foreign language, audio, large print, a range of literacy levels, CDs and DVDs.

As well as ensuring a wider group of readers can access library services, the Home Library Service also provides and maintains an important link with some of the borough's more vulnerable residents. As well as books, library staff also deliver various leaflets on behalf of Adult Social Care services and ensure that any cause for concern is flagged up immediately with the relevant service.

2.6 Bibliotherapy Service

The Bibliotherapy Service is also based at Brompton Library. The service is delivered in two key ways. The first and most important is through reading groups that take place at Chelsea, Kensal and Brompton libraries, as well as in various other community locations. These groups are open for all members of the public to join. Additionally, two closed groups for patients undergoing psychiatric care are held in Chelsea and Westminster Hospital and St. Charles Hospital. Members of these closed groups often choose to join open groups once they leave hospital.

These reading groups differ significantly from traditional book groups in that they meet more frequently and are run by trained facilitators. Text is read aloud and challenging language is explained. Books are chosen with care to promote discussion and to explore readers' associated thoughts and feelings. As well as improving reading skills, the groups provide readers with a chance to express their emotions in a controlled, safe and non-judgemental environment. With the exception of the facilitator, none of the attendees know each other's backgrounds and in the open groups former mental health patients and homeless people mix comfortably and anonymously with other group attendees.

Groups are well attended and each session attracts an average of ten to twelve people. An evaluation is done for each group to ensure that it is fully accessible.

The second strand of the project is the well-being collection – a range of good quality self-help books which can help people understand and cope with common mental health problems.

This project is well established and feedback from group attendees and those supporting them is very positive. It has been promoted well and has secured a good level of GP referrals. The project is recognised as an example of excellent practice in London. Unfortunately, the project is under threat as funding will run out in August 2011. Staff expressed a strong commitment to the project and a desire to keep it going, but there are concerns as to how this will be achieved.

2.7 Other comments

As well as the various staff training packages mentioned above, all staff receive general training in equalities. This consists of three modules; age and disability, race and faith and sex and gender.

3 KENSINGTON CENTRAL LIBRARY

3.1 Overview

Kensington Central Library is larger than Brompton Library and serves a more diverse and transient customer base. Readers are not just those living nearby; customers also join the library because they regularly pass through or work in the local area, or because they are drawn by the library's specialist stock for research purposes or interest.

The Library has not been through the same modernisation process as Brompton and the planned refurbishment is not likely to take place in full, due to efficiency savings. However, there will be a staged transformation programme, starting in June 2011. Amongst other improvements, this will see the removal of the counter to make a better use of the entrance space and staff will be able to walk the library floor offering assistance, rather than being behind a desk.

3.2 Layout and design

The library has an access ramp leading up to the main entrance. The shelving units in the library are listed and therefore cannot be moved or changed. Fortunately they are at a suitable height and sufficiently spaced to be accessible to wheelchair users.

Lifts are available to all floors of the library. However, they are not big enough to allow turning space for wheelchair users, or to allow a wheelchair user and assistant or carer to use the lift at the same time. Bells to summon assistance are located on both floors of the library.

Lighting is not adequate in some areas of the library, especially in the main stairwell. This could cause difficulties for those with visual impairments. Again this will be improved in the refurbishment.

3.3 Facilitating communication

As in Brompton Library, there is a collection of foreign language books and staff have access to the same equalities training courses, including sympathetic hearing.

Signage is currently not adequate and this will be addressed through the introduction of digital signage in the refurbishment taking place later this year. As in Brompton Library, all signs will be carefully designed using appropriate colours and contrasts.

3.4 IT

There are a number of PCs available for use on the first floor of the library. They are booked through a self-service kiosk and are usually in high demand. The SuperNova access suite is installed on at least one of the PCs and staff are trained to provide support on Windows accessibility features if requested. There is one computer that cannot be booked and is available for a maximum of fifteen minutes if customers wish to use a computer briefly.

There are also computers for public use in the Children's Library, set with appropriate filters. These computers also have text magnification features.

3.5 Various projects and collections

A number of projects are based in or operate out of Kensington Central Library:

- The Book Start project is aimed at promoting reading in the under five age group, and consists of three free gifts of books to young children, at less than twelve months, two and then three years old. The package can be tailored if children have hearing or visual impairments.
- The library has strong links to the Open University and open days are held within the library for service users to enquire about possible study packages.
- Unfortunately, due to a lack of resources, it will be necessary to close the study support service operating in four libraries in the borough. This service has been of particular support to children and young people who do not speak English as a first language, or who cannot seek assistance with homework from their parents as they also do not speak English with confidence.

- Community and voluntary organisation use the library to promote services and activities.

The library also houses a number of specific collections. The main reference library in the borough is located here, as well as a large collection of biographies. The local studies library also houses many historical documents relating to Kensington and Chelsea.

3.6 Discussion with Ms Battye, Head of Library Services

At the end of the tour Members met with Ms Battye and discussed engagement and consultation activities to identify the diverse needs of the 43,000 active service users of Royal Borough libraries. Ms Battye explained that the Residents' Panel was consulted on stock development. In addition, a decision has been taken to continue the formerly compulsory public library survey, the results of which are broken down demographically so it is possible to see if any service user groups have particular concerns. Furthermore, a number of customer journey mapping exercises have been undertaken.

Members noted there were important services and appealing projects taking place within the libraries, but felt that these were not sufficiently publicised. It was also felt that there was potential for greater community engagement if people were made aware of what was on offer. It was noted that 30 – 40 year old service users in particular were under represented in the service user profile. Ms Battye confirmed that all RBKC staff members were offered library membership on joining the authority.

Members also discussed the impact of Tri-borough proposals on library services. It was noted that LB Hammersmith & Fulham run a similar service, whereas City of Westminster's service is much bigger and operates very differently. However, it was also noted that there were significant opportunities in working together, not least in the sharing of stock across all three boroughs. Westminster, for example, has a large population of Chinese residents and consequently has a relevant specialist collection of books and other media. In the Royal Borough, the much smaller Chinese population does not make it cost effective to carry this stock. However, it may be beneficial to Royal Borough Chinese residents to be able to access the collection in Westminster.

Lastly, Ms Battye noted that some excellent work was taking place with volunteers within Library Services. Due to help from volunteers it was still possible to offer one-on-one support to service users needing assistance, for example in IT support, despite shrinking resources.

4 GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

- 4.1 Members were highly impressed by the quality and range of the services on offer in the two libraries visited. Both Councillors agreed that the libraries actively promote equality and seek to meet the diverse needs of the communities they serve.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 Having considered the report, the Cabinet and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee agreed that the following recommendations be referred to the Cabinet for approval:

- That, given the absence of an induction loop at Brompton Library due to interference from other electronic devices, officers investigate alternative solutions for providing assistance to service users with a hearing impairment.
- That stronger links be established between the Home Library Service and GPs and hospitals, in order to ensure that all patients with mobility difficulties that might prevent them getting to and from a library be offered an automatic referral to the Home Library Service. This would be particularly effective at the point of discharge from hospital.
- That Members recognised the importance of the bibliotherapy service and were keen to find a way to keep it going, despite current funding coming to an end. Members suggested that consideration be given to recruiting and training volunteers to facilitate bibliotherapy groups.
- That volunteer support also be sought to protect and maintain the study support service, which Members believe plays a significant role in supporting children and young people with English as a second language.
- That, if not already updated, the general equalities training provided to all Library Services staff be amended to include training on the new Public Sector Equality Duty (s149 Equality Act 2010).
- That, like new members of staff joining the Royal Borough, all newly elected Councillors be offered library membership as part of their induction pack.

COUNCILLORS CAROL CARUANA AND GERARD HARGREAVES

SCRUTINY OF EQUALITIES WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Background papers: None

Contact officer: Clair Bantin, Scrutiny Manager

Tel: 020 361 2634 **E-mail:** clair.bantin@rbkc.gov.uk