

Title of meeting: Culture, Leisure and Sport Decision Meeting

Date of meeting: 11 December 2015

Subject: Library Services for the Vision Impaired

Report by: Director of Culture and City Development

Wards affected: ALL

Key decision: No

Full Council decision: No

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 To inform the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Sport of Portsmouth Library and Archive Service's provision for blind and vision impaired residents; the breadth of the support offered; its contribution to the city's health and wellbeing agendas and to make a recommendation that seeks to improve the offer, in a context of reducing budgets.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 **That the Library and Archive Service engages with Adult Social Care, Public Health and local disability groups to explore how services to residents with sensory impairments can be further developed in the city.**

3. Background

- 3.1 Portsmouth Library and Archives have been providing additional services to people with vision impairment for over fourteen years. These have gone well above and beyond the provision of large print and audio books. In addition to a weekly ICT drop-in session, there is a weekly information and support group, two reading groups (using MP3 and audio CD), a quarterly newsletter, a telephone advice line, sensory shop and a regular programme of events and guest speakers. These services won the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals' "Libraries Change Lives Award" in 2003 and were one of the three nominees for the 2015 award.
- 3.2 These activities are delivered by the Library Vision Impairment Services Officer, supported by library staff and volunteers. In 2014, just under 1000 visits were made to these library-based groups and 364 people made appointments to see the Vision Impairment Service Officer in person for advice or support.

The advice line attracts a large number of enquiries. In 2014 there were over 1300 enquiries, an increase of five per cent on the previous year (see Appendix 1 which features impact evidence from Vision Impairment Service users).

- 3.3 The Vision Impairment Service Officer, along with the Library Macmillan Cancer Support Officer, attends the South East Society of Chief Librarians Health and Wellbeing group, a network through which they can share best practice in providing inclusive and accessible library services (see Appendix 2 detailing the "Six Steps to library services for blind and partially sighted people). There is a link between sight loss and reduced wellbeing - over one-third of older people with sight loss are also living with depression - and library services to the vision impaired make a significant contribution to the reduction of loneliness and isolation felt by many residents. Disabled people more generally are also more likely to be digitally excluded, unable to benefit from online services so library support and signposting in ICT and other assistive technologies encourages people to live more independent lives.
- 3.4 The Library Service also works supports the work of local organisations such as Portsmouth Disability Forum and Healthwatch, ensuring the views of disabled people are put forward to key decision makers in the city. Sight loss affects people of all ages but especially older people. One in five people aged seventy-five and one in two aged ninety and over are living with sight loss. For blind people of working age, there are additional challenges. Two-thirds of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are not in paid employment.
- 3.5 The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) has been awarded Heritage Lottery Funding for a "Sensing Culture" project, the aim of which is to make cultural service provision more accessible. Portsmouth Library and Archive Services are one of four partners in the South East that are taking part and have been allocated £33,360 to support efforts to make the Conan Doyle Collection more accessible to visually impaired people. Already, staff and volunteers have been trained in audio describing collections. Interactive information panels will be developed, along with specially made handling objects that can be made transportable and toured.

4. Reasons for recommendations

- 4.1 From set up in 2001 to 2005 two part-time workers from Learning Links were funded by the Library Service with some additional support from Adult Social Care for the telephone helpline after this. Since then, however, the work has been solely funded from the Library and Archive Service budget. There is a small amount of income generation from Braille translation, the sale of products for people with sensory impairment and consultation work.
- 4.2 The Sensory Team in Adult Social Care has reduced in size over the last few years as the authority as a whole has had to make savings. At the same time, with an increase in the aging population projected, the number of people with sensory impairments will also increase. It is estimated that by 2050 the number of people with sight loss in the UK could be nearly four million, almost double the current figures.

5. Equality impact assessment (EIA)

- 5.1 A preliminary EIA has been completed and there was found to be no negative impacts on service users.

6. Legal comments

- 6.1 As the proposals set out in the report build upon and continue with the existing policy there are no additional legal comments

7. Director of Finance comments

- 7.1 The current library services for the visually impaired are delivered within existing library budgets.
- 7.2 Although there has been a financial contribution from Social Care in the past, this ceased some years ago. Any future developments in the service will be dependent on external funding being secured. This may be awarded either directly or indirectly such as the partnering arrangement with the RNIB to deliver the Sensing Culture project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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Signed by:
Stephen Baily
Director of Culture and City Development

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Impact evidence from service users

Appendix 2: Six Steps to Library Services for Blind and Partially Sighted People

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location
Key facts about sight loss	www.rnib.org.uk

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/
rejected by Cabinet member for Culture, Leisure and Sport on 11 December 2015.

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Signed by:
Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Sport

Appendix 1: Impact evidence from service users

1. Michael lost his sight unexpectedly. The optician told him to see his GP as a matter of urgency and two years later he was registered blind. Michael had never used a computer before but a Portsmouth City Council sensory impairment adviser put him in touch with the Vision Impairment Services Officer. Michael was introduced to the library's computer facilities and helped with the accessibility features.

"I wanted to research my family tree but my sight wouldn't handle the normal text sizes on menus and pages. Zoom text made a great difference enabling me to increase the size of the text on the monitor screen to a much larger size. It does have disadvantages because the monitor does not increase in size so on you are only able to see parts of the web page and you have to navigate with the mouse around the page to see it all. This can be a bit difficult and some people feel quite seasick at first but with practise you soon get to it. Although expensive it enables you to carry on using a computer. Having now made the change from Zoom Text to Windows 7, which was a bit difficult at first, I have now been able to carry on with my work tracing my family tree.

I have found it very helpful being able to read census returns and other documents and if I come up against a brick wall there is always someone available to sort the problem out. I have now been attending the afternoon sessions for over eight years and I had never touched a computer before so it was a bit of a learning curve whilst dealing with sight loss. So I can safely say that without the help and support of libraries my life would be very different indeed."

2. "I would like to thank Portsmouth libraries for all the help and support they have provided me since the loss of my sight 4 years ago. Since losing my sight the library has provided me with support and has been a venue to learn and adapt to my condition. On my first visit I met the Vision Impairment Officer who explained to me the many different services that the library offered.

There were courses such as learning how to use a computer, reading Braille and joining the visually impaired book club. These are all services that I use regularly and have helped me in my day to day life. The vital services that are provided have helped me adapt to my condition and they have taught me things that I never thought I could do. Before losing my eyesight I couldn't use a computer at all. Now I'm on it every day, catching up with my friends via email and over the internet. I have also taken full advantage of the wide range of talking books and magazines available at the library. Furthermore, I visit the library regularly to attend their information days. These days provide me and others with visual impairment information on the latest technologies being developed that can help in day to day life.

To conclude the library has provided me with a range of services which has improved my quality of life and without this service dealing with my condition would have been a lot more challenging. These services provided are vital for blind and visually impaired people".

3. "For many years before I was diagnosed and treated for Macular Degeneration I struggled to read the menus on my computer. Following my diagnosis I was fortunate enough to attend a workshop for partially sighted people where I was told about weekly meetings of people interested in using computer programs which magnified the text.

This sounded great to me, just what I had been searching for, so I started to go to the Wednesday afternoon computer drop-ins. Over a few sessions I was shown a talking and magnification programme called Guide and I realised that this programme was what I required to enable me to continue to use my laptop. So I obtained a copy of Guide and since it was installed I have enjoyed dealing unaided each day with my emails, scanning and storing photographs and sending these as attachments to some of my emails.

I appreciate that Guide will enable me to independently do other computer skills in time and I am looking forward to the challenge. I now look forward to using my laptop whereas before Guide I made so many errors I felt frustrated and gave up using it. Now I love trying my luck and feel my confidence is returning due not only to the Guide programme but because of the library support."

4. "I have derived tremendous benefits and enjoyment from using the library service from the time I gave up reading books many years ago, and discovered the joys to be found in the audio books section.

In the past ten or so years I have had the opportunity to join many of the groups run by the Portsmouth Library Service, including:

- The monthly Spoken Word Group, initially meeting at Carnegie Library, then moving to Southsea Library.
- The MP3 Reading Group meeting monthly at Central Library.
- The Drop-in Group meeting weekly at Southsea Library, where a variety of speakers cover a range of subjects; information on day to day activities being held throughout the city is given out, and there is the opportunity to meet and chat to people with sight loss, who could otherwise feel isolated with their disability.

In addition to the above, I have attended many one day events covering:

- Visual aid exhibitions.
- Workshops on the practical use of mobile phones and tablets.
- An intergenerational project held at Portsea Library where sighted pupils from a local secondary school provided tuition in downloading and copying from PCs to removable devices. The young people learned a lot more about the effects of sight loss and we learned a lot about the young people!

- Talks given by professional readers of commercial audio books available on loan from the library, held at Central Library.

The above rich tapestry of activities organised within the Library Service has enriched my life, not simply from the information learned, but the opportunity to meet and mix regularly with men and women of all ages living with sight loss and realising that we are the same as everyone else, with similar interests and concerns, but just not seeing too well, or at all."

5. "I was medically retired due to my visual impairment and after years of working this was an alien situation for me. I lost a lot of self-confidence at this time and the Portsmouth library facilities effectively became a lifeline as I adapted to a lifestyle very different to what I had encountered so far.

The library facilities afforded me the opportunity to try out visual assistance software of various types and to assess which would be best for me to use on returning to the workplace. I was able to work unaided and soon found myself confident enough to help others to become familiar with using the software available. I became part of a network of people who were in a similar situation and it was comforting to realise I was not in this alone.

The information available at the library enabled me to find out about other organisations, equipment and software that was available for people with visual difficulties and I am in no doubt that without this valuable facility I would not be as confident in myself or have achieved as much.

Appendix 2: Six Steps to Library Services for Blind and Partially Sighted People

Launched in 2011 by Society of Chief Librarians, Scottish Library & Information Council and Share the Vision, signatory library authorities commit to the following:

1. Use Your Reading Choices with blind and partially sighted customers to assess their reading needs and facilitate access to public libraries and other relevant services (<http://tinyurl.com/rnib2>).
2. Use Reading Sight (www.readingsight.org.uk), the free website for library staff supporting blind and partially sighted people to access reading and reading services.
3. Provide local collections of large print and audio books.
4. Have a strategy in place for provision of access technology throughout your library service.
5. Designate a "champion" for the reading needs of blind and partially sighted people.
6. Participate in Make a Noise in Libraries Fortnight (www.rnib.org.uk/manil) run annually by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB).