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Title of meeting: Culture, Leisure and Economic Development Decision Meeting

Subject: Summer Reading Challenge Update

Date of meeting: 5 February 2021

Report by: Director of Culture, Leisure and Regulatory Services

Wards affected: ALL

1. Requested by

1.1 Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Economic Development

2. Purpose

2.1 To update the Cabinet Member on participation in 'Silly Squad', the 2020 Summer Reading Challenge; the impact of Covid-19 on that participation and plans for this year's Challenge.

3. Information Requested

3.1 The Summer Reading Challenge is embedded in the Library Service's annual events calendar and 2019 had been the most successful year on record for Portsmouth, with well over 3000 children registering to take part and over 1800 children going on to complete the Challenge by reading six books over the summer holiday.

3.2 For a number of years, participation has been making small annual increases, with just over ten per cent of Portsmouth primary school pupils routinely completing the Challenge. In 2019, a further small increase in participation was achieved by targeting disadvantaged pupils in a pilot Summer Reading Challenge PLUS. These pupils were invited to attend libraries during the summer term where staff and volunteers talked to them about their book choices and encouraged them to read six books before the holidays. The Virtual School also targeted a number of looked after children across the city to participate in this way.

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- 3.3 Promotional materials and other incentives that support the Challenge are typically ordered in January every year. Once libraries were closed in March 2020 in accordance with the first national lockdown, The Reading Agency, the national charity that organise the Challenge consulted with library authorities as to their requirements, given the uncertainty as to extent that public libraries would be able to reopen in the summer of 2020.
- 3.4 Libraries were permitted to open with limited services from July 4 2020. The majority of library authorities nationally had decided to make the Challenge a predominantly digital offer with some paper materials for targeted use. This meant that there was a surplus of hard copy, paper resources.
- 3.5 The Reading Agency offered 12,500 packs to Portsmouth at no charge, which would otherwise have had to be recycled or disposed of. As we had already purchased 3,500 packs, it was decided to target all pupils in the city, something that was felt to be practical, given the timescales.
- 3.6 Packs were duly distributed to every primary school in the city that was open in late July. However, only pupils of key worker families and Years R, One and Six were attending school as permitted by Government. This meant that in practice, only a limited number of packs went home with pupils before the school holidays. Some schools did report using the packs as incentives for reading in the autumn term when more pupils were being taught in school.
- 3.7 By the end of September, 684 children had completed the Challenge using the paper materials. 814 children registered online with 335 of those going on to successfully complete the online Challenge. The total of 1019 children completing the Challenge was forty-four per cent less than in 2019. There were some technical issues with the official website, with some parents reporting difficulty in logging in multiple children. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence of 'digital fatigue' with children and parents having to undertake most of their learning and working activity online at home during the pandemic.
- 3.8 The theme of the Summer Reading Challenge 2021 is Wild World Heroes, which The Reading Agency have developed in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund to help children explore environmental issues and also enjoy reading over the summer holidays. It is expected this will be an engaging theme and one that supports learning on the topic that already takes place in schools.
- 3.9 Given the uncertainty with the current pandemic, the Library and Archive Service will once again provide a hybrid print/digital offer this summer. If permitted, library outreach staff will endeavour to visit as many primary schools as possible to

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promote participation during the summer term. Disadvantaged pupils will also be targeted and invited them to libraries before the summer holidays, again if this is a permitted activity.

- 3.10 In a previous report to the Cabinet Member, a recommendation was made to explore additional funding to increase participation by disadvantaged pupils. The purchase of materials to support the Challenge is currently funded entirely by the Library Service so increasing participation has a corresponding impact on budgets.
- 3.11 Other options explored have included informal conversations with Head Teachers, looking at the feasibility of schools purchasing materials for all their pupils. The materials roughly cost around £1 per pupil. If this expenditure was from school budgets, the Library Service would then spend more money on purchasing books, eBooks and eAudiobooks to support the increased demand on library materials. However, this approach, whilst delivering a universal summer holiday reading activity, is unlikely to change participation levels, especially amongst disadvantaged pupils.
- 3.12 In order to continue the piloted work with disadvantaged pupils, an expression of interest will be made in January for funding from the Portsmouth allocation of the Department of Education's Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF). This will enable libraries to provide extended creative activities linked to the Summer Reading Challenge, along with a healthy lunch. This approach has been taken by a number of other authorities and has proven to be successful in engaging children and families who would not normally engage with libraries, books and reading.

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Signed by
Stephen Baily
Director of Culture, Leisure and Regulatory Services

Appendices: None

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:

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Title of document	Location