

14 June, 2007

Councillor R C Edger OBE
3 Turner Place
College Town
Sandhurst
Berkshire
GU47 0FW

Dear Bob,

**RESPONSE TO A REPORT BY A WORKING GROUP OF THE LIFELONG
LEARNING AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL
Review of Library Provision in Bracknell Forest**

I am writing with my response to this report. Its recommendations have been considered carefully by the Library and Departmental Management Teams and with me. I think that the most direct way to respond is by reference to each of the observations or conclusions and to the recommendations. I shall address each of them in turn. The sections in italics are quotations from the report and use its numbering.

Observations / Conclusions

- 4.1 *From its investigations, the Working Group concludes that libraries are hubs of their communities, as evidenced in the surveys undertaken as part of the review, and offer valued meeting places for all, particularly the elderly and isolated.*

This is acknowledged, although Libraries are not resourced to be social centres.

- 4.2 *Members feel that the Library and Information service is proactive pursuing strategies for book selection and display, library layout, signage, promotional events and ICT.*

Recent examples include a reading groups seminar led by local librarians and held in March 2007. Over 50 people came together to share their enjoyment of reading. A regular pattern of author visits takes place from Susanna Gretz for children to Lionel Shriver for adults. Reminiscence sessions have been introduced in Ascot Heath and Crowthorne Libraries.

All events are advertised on library plasma screens in Bracknell and Crowthorne Libraries and the Council's public website, thereby utilising ICT to promote events.

- 4.3 *Library location and layout is thought to be crucial to vibrancy as, despite its appeal, the Ascot Durning Library appears under utilised owing to its remote siting and limited signage.*

This confirms the experience of the service.

- 4.4 *Accessibility is an important library feature and consideration should be given to physical access, parking and opening hours.*

Feasibility studies have been undertaken to provide lift access in the current Bracknell library. The estimated cost of a suitable lift is £60,000. This would be difficult to justify in the current budget situation and lifetime of the current library. A lift will be provided in the new library in the Civic Hub. Extending opening hours would carry further revenue costs not provided for within the Library budget.

- 4.5 *Volunteers are a valued commodity assisting with the home library service and use of further volunteers could be made especially where funding constraints limit services.*

The Library Service values highly the contribution of our volunteers but it is not without a cost. It should be noted that volunteers require management and support through training, communication and for health and safety considerations.

- 4.6 *As reading groups and book clubs appear popular and over subscribed they could be extended for all age groups in libraries across the borough.*

The range of existing reading groups already covers primary school children to those living in residential accommodation. Recently a librarian has become involved in providing storytelling and sharing books with children who attend the breakfast club in Crown Wood Primary as part of the extended services developments.

- 4.7 *There is a valuable link between libraries and education and the Working Group would like to see this extended, e.g. via ICT learning suites as approximately 20% of adult are said to have limited literacy skills. This has been commenced with Learn Direct.*

The Library Service would be pleased to expand these facilities as soon as resources allow.

- 4.8 *A coffee shop and toilets would be a welcome addition to a library.*

These facilities will be accessible in the new Civic Hub.

- 4.9 *It appears that some users are unaware that they can return loan material to any library in the Borough as the courier service will return items to the library of origin. Wider promotion of this facility would be beneficial.*

Promotion of this facility will continue.

4.10 *Themed display of books, e.g. a best sellers section, facilitates borrowers' selection.*

4.11 *Users have an expectation of a 24/7 service and means of increasing opening hours and accessibility would be welcomed. This may include an on-line reference facility of reference texts such as the Encyclopedia Britannica available to users at home 24/7, a self-issue loan scheme, electronic ordering of loan items for home delivery at a charge, an out-of-hours return 'drop box' or introduction of e-books.*

An online reference facility is already available throughout the library service regarding access to the Oxford English Dictionary and other reference works, including encyclopaedias.

4.12 *The 'Bookstart' project, which introduces young children to reading, is important and should be continued.*

The "Bookstart" project is continuing with financial support from Early Years funding.

4.13 *As much demand for library services is from those learning English as a second language, the provision of translation information would assist.*

The Library Service has recognised the needs of those for whom English is a second language. It has purchased stock which includes books in foreign languages and has copies of information booklets for families new to Bracknell Forest in some foreign languages. Further expansion of translation services is dependent on resources.

4.14 *Users appear to be more satisfied with the re-organised mobile library service which is more personalised than that previously provided.*

This confirms that the objectives for redesigning the service are being achieved.

4.15 *Modernisation and increased use of ICT is necessary for libraries to flourish in the 21st century where their role is seen to be moving towards promoting reading and learning, enabling access to digital skills and services and encouraging community cohesion and civic values.*

The library service in Bracknell Forest is making good progress in modernisation and provision of ICT facilities, with enhanced ICT in two new libraries since 1997 and a new library in Bracknell as part of the Civic Hub to look forward to. It already meets the Public Library Standard in its provision for ICT.

Recommendations

General Recommendations

5.1 *As teenagers represent the lowest library user age group (2% of borrowers), further work to provide appropriate stock and surroundings*

should be undertaken to encourage them to make greater use of libraries and develop reading habits.

This is part of the Libraries strategy and it takes account of the access that this age group have to school libraries and other sources of information. Our most recent data shows an increase in usage by this group from 2% to 5%.

- 5.2 *Internal and external library signage should be reviewed and updated where necessary.*

This work is ongoing.

- 5.3 *The provision of further ICT learning suites in libraries should be pursued if possible to provide learning opportunities for adults with limited literacy skills in a non-threatening environment in conjunction with adult education co-ordinators.*

This is largely prevented by lack of capital resources, but is part of the planning for the new Civic Hub.

- 5.4 *Consideration should be given to introducing an on-line system enabling library users to access reference materials at all times from their homes utilising their library card and a pin number.*

See 4.11 above – such facilities are already available across all libraries.

- 5.5 *The Library and Information Service could make greater use of volunteers to enhance and expand its services, to engage residents in promoting the libraries as a community place.*

See 4.5 above – volunteers are encouraged in so far as adequate supervision can be arranged.

Recommendations Concerning the Civic Hub Library

The new civic hub library should:

- 5.6 *be flexible to facilitate development and adaptation to meet future needs;*
- 5.7 *have an exhibition style to facilitate public art, heritage collections and other displays as an entrance feature and be light and airy with planting;*
- 5.8 *feature flexible low level display shelving and versatile furniture which can be re-arranged to accommodate displays/events etc;*
- 5.9 *locate the children's area on the ground floor to facilitate access;*
- 5.10 *include an ICT learning suite, preferably in a separate room with links to the library, preferably featuring a Learn Direct outreach centre;*

5.11 utilise electronic signage and boards both within and outside;

5.12 offer a 'quick pick and browse' self-issue loan scheme to speed borrowing and free staff for other duties and extended opening; and

5.13 Include a loan material 'drop off' facility to enable return of borrowed items outside opening hours.

These comments will be taken into account in designing the new central library.

I can assure you that all of these points have or will be taken into account in future planning, in so far as resources allow.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Councillor Alan Ward
Executive Member for Education & Libraries