



# Northumberland County Council

COMMITTEE: ASHINGTON AND BLYTH LOCAL AREA COUNCIL

DATE: 16 NOVEMBER 2022

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## **Petition Regarding South Beach Library, Blyth**

**Report of:** Nigel Walsh, Interim Service Director

**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Jeff Watson, Cabinet Member for Healthy Lives

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### **Purpose of report**

To acknowledge and respond to the petition and update the Local Area Council on progress made in addressing the issues raised.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that Members:

1. Note the petition received requesting the reopening of South Beach Library
2. Note the steps being taken to reprovide Library Services following the pandemic to provide a more accessible, improved community resource.

### **Link to Corporate Plan**

The Northumberland County Council (NCC) Corporate Plan 2021-24 has identified the core strategic priorities and supporting key organisational actions of which the following are particularly relevant to the Library Service.

1. **Living** - Evidence confirms the therapeutic value of reading for pleasure, with Libraries offering a lifetime's free supply of reading resources available to all. Library staff are a consistent presence offering support through reading in a space that is safe and free to use; provide a wide range of information and signposting

which supports public health and wellbeing priorities as well as a programme of events and activities that promote wellbeing through social inclusion.

2. **Connecting** - Libraries offer social support networks and information to support residents of Northumberland to seek advice/support within our communities. Libraries offer the space and support to facilitate social support networks through their activity and events programme. They provide supported access to information and signposting that enables residents of Northumberland to obtain advice and support, often within their own community, at the point of need.
3. **Thriving** - Libraries provide support and access to digital learning and skills for those seeking employment; access to space, resources, and expert knowledge for use by existing business owners and potential entrepreneurs for group or individual activity which directly contributes to economic growth and regeneration of communities.
4. **Learning** - Libraries play a significant role in the development of speech, language, and literacy skills (and in turn, in confidence and creativity) with activities such as Storytimes and the Summer Reading Challenge established across the county for children and families. Along with support for reading and creative writing groups of all ages, Library staff will support individuals who wish to pursue their own studies with access to resources and signpost to communities of interest, e.g., local and family history societies.

## **Key Issues**

### **1. The South Beach Library Building**

1.1 South Beach Library is accommodated in a purpose-built single room facility that adjoins the Community Centre (NE24 3RJ) which is run by the Residents Association. The Library and Community Centre are located centrally within the South Beach Estate, near the Bede Academy (South), local shops, the scout hut, and a public house.

1.2 The Council was granted a ground lease from Lord Ridley for the construction of the Library. The lease is for 75 years commencing 25 June 1991. Use of the property is restricted under covenant for the purpose of Public Library provision.

1.3 Any change of use from Public Library provision would require property owner consent. NCC Property Services have indicated that this could be possible however further investigation will be required if this is a consideration.

1.4 The Council has an annual licence agreement with the adjoining Community Centre to enable library staff to have use of their toilets and welfare facilities accessed via a connecting door between the two sites.

### **2. Service Status**

2.1 Pre-pandemic, South Beach Library was open for 4 hours per week. No staffing

budget is specifically allocated to the site so resource is drawn from other libraries to support the limited operating hours.

2.2 During Covid the Library closed in line with government guidance. To continue to support the local Library users a *Doorstep Delivery Service*, which enabled Library members to receive a regular delivery of reading material, commenced. This service was offered to the South Beach Library community with over 100 books being delivered to residents between September 2020 and December 2021. This service continues to the current day.

2.3 Emerging from pandemic the Library Service has reinstated, where possible, business as usual operating arrangements across the extensive countywide library network of 30 sites. As a result of vacancies and unplanned staff absences in the service, a complete return to pre pandemic operating hours has been problematic and consequently South Beach is yet to reopen.

2.4 A designated 'Hub Library' is located in Blyth Town Centre. Characteristics of a Hub Library include:

- Providing a flexible and welcoming community space for group and individual activities such as storytimes, family learning, group and individual study, reading and writing groups
- Convenient town centre positioning with convenient access from a local transport hub
- Access to IT offering support to use different devices, including their own, to residents who have little/no IT skills and/or no access to IT at home for their own purposes including job searching, benefit applications and keeping in touch.
- An events and activities programme that supports the delivery of the Universal Offers in line with local priorities and national initiatives
- A variety of study spaces for those who lack the space and resources at home
- Local studies resources for loan and reference with a focus on the specific local area
- The full range of books and resources for loan

### **3. Previous Community Engagement and Feedback**

3.1 During the Library Service consultation exercise which ran from December 2019 to March 2020, an information drop in session was held at each Library. At the South Beach event, a small number of regular Library users attended on 10 January 2020. From this session it was established that the priorities of those who attended focused on preserving service provision and to encourage children and young people to use the Library. This feedback was noted as part of the overall consultation exercise.

### **4. The Petition**

4.1 On 5 September 2022, Northumberland County Council formally received a petition from residents of the South Beach Estate. The petition has 645 signatories and requests the following options be considered:

- *That the South Beach building reopens as a Library.*
- *That the South Beach building reopens as a Library and provides space for small clubs and groups to use this space for their own community purposes.*

## **5. NCC Activity Following Receipt of the Petition**

5.1 In response to receiving this petition, Nigel Walsh, Interim Service Director, together with Library Service leadership, met with three South Beach resident representatives on site on 20 September 2022 to discuss their concerns, and ambitions, further. During this meeting, residents reaffirmed the wish of the community to see the South Beach site reopen for a defined timetable which extended beyond the pre pandemic 4 hours per week, and to incorporate community groups and activities within the site. Representatives were pragmatic in their stance and expectations, and embraced the concept of a Library Service / volunteer / community group collaboration being formed to realise this vision.

## **6. Future Provision of Library Services on South Beach**

6.1 There is shared ambition between NCC and the resident representatives to re-introduce Library Services for the South Beach area, and an acknowledgement that provision would preferably extend beyond the previous four hours.

6.2 Given the current resource pressures, and the operational constraints of the current building, options are currently being considered for reprovision of Library Services. A potential collaborative model involving local community partners and residents could enable a wider range of service to be provided beyond the current four hours.

6.3 Residents are actively engaged with NCC officers and visits to Libraries managed in collaboration with local community partners, and volunteers, are being coordinated to inform future discussion.

6.4 The management of the Community Centre are also engaged with NCC officers to ensure that any potential future operating model brings the maximum benefits possible to the local community. This is essential due to the physical restrictions, and dependencies, of the Library site and the current agreements in place.

6.5 It should be noted that interest has also been expressed from wider community stakeholders in the future use of the Library building. Decisions on the agreed future model of operation for Library Services will be taken in the context of available resources, sustainability, timescales and the potential for realising maximum benefit for local residents.

## **Background**

## 7. National Context

7.1 Library Authorities have a statutory duty under the [Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964](#) 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons' for all those who live, work or study in the area (section 7). In providing this service, councils must, among other things:

- encourage both adults and children to make full use of the Library Service
- lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area

7.2 The DCMS report 'Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021' (section 2.2) states 'Libraries are vital community hubs - bringing people together and giving them access to the services and support they need to help them live better. Our ambition is for everyone to; choose to use Libraries, because they see clear benefits and positive outcomes from doing so, understand what Library Services offer and how they can make the most of what's available to them, be introduced to new ideas and opportunities, then given confidence and quick and easy access to tools, skills and information they need to improve their quality of life, and receive trusted guidance through the evolving information landscape and build the skills needed to thrive in a changing world'.

7.3 The DCMS also highlight that Library Services contribute to seven outcomes critical to the individuals and communities in their areas:

- cultural and creative enrichment
- increased reading and literacy
- improved digital access and literacy
- helping everyone achieve their full potential
- healthier and happier lives
- greater prosperity
- stronger, more resilient communities

### Implications

<b>Policy</b>	Libraries are uniquely placed to help the Council and its partners deliver objectives linked to community cohesion, health and wellbeing, economic growth, promoting independent living or increasing life chances.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	None at this stage.
<b>Legal</b>	Library Authorities have a statutory duty under the <a href="#">Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964</a> 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons' for all those who live, work or study in the area (section 7). In providing this service, councils must, among other things:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encourage both adults and children to make full use of the Library Service</li> <li>• lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area</li> </ul>
<b>Procurement</b>	None at this stage
<b>Human Resources</b>	None at this stage
<b>Property</b>	None at this stage
<b>Equalities</b> (Impact Assessment attached) Yes No N/a	<p>Any future re-provision will be based on increasing the accessibility and scope of services provided. The self-completion element of the Library Consultation (2020) asked for demographic information from respondents related to the protected characteristics.</p> <p>Libraries provide safe spaces in the heart of their communities and provide many services targeting people who are living on a low income, people who are lonely, unemployed, or elderly, and people with long term medical conditions or disabilities.</p>
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	None at this stage
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	Libraries provide opportunities which foster community engagement and cohesion whilst offering diversionary activity.
<b>Customer Consideration</b>	<p>The Library Service is actively engaged with local residents regarding the issues raised.</p> <p>Libraries are trusted spaces, free to enter and open to all. In them, people explore and share reading, information, knowledge and culture.</p> <p>The Libraries Consultation (2020) which informs library strategy was widely publicised in Libraries, via council channels, media and social media and youth council etc. A total of 5,068 respondents completed the self-completion survey; of these over 1,400 responses were received as paper copies, with the rest online. Information drop-in sessions were held at all 30 Libraries across the County for people to find out more about the consultation. Telephone interviews conducted with residents to provide more in-depth views on factors driving some of the key findings from the self-completion survey.</p>
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	None at this stage
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>	Positive impacts for users and potential volunteers would be realised.

<b>Wards</b>	South Blyth
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**Report sign off**

**Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:**

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