

From: Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Community Services  
Barbara Cooper, Corporate Director Growth, Environment & Transport

To: Growth Economic Development and Communities  
Cabinet Committee

**Subject: Proposed Redesign of the Mobile Library service**

Key decision: Affects more than 2 Electoral Divisions

Classification: Unrestricted  
Past Pathway of Paper: N/A  
Future Pathway of Paper: Cabinet Member Decision  
Electoral Division: All

**Summary:** In this report proposals are presented for the redesign of the Mobile library service so a more efficient and effective service is provided that will also deliver savings to KCC. This report also outlines how mobile library users will be engaged in shaping this redesign.

**Recommendation:** The Growth, Environment and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse, or make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Community Services on the proposed decision to undertake a customer engagement exercise with mobile library customers on proposed route efficiencies service improvements and changes as attached at appendix A.

## 1. Introduction and Context

- 1.1 In June 2015 KCC Cabinet decided that until it was possible for the full Library, Registration and Archive (LRA) service to transfer to a charitable trust model, LRA would continue its transformation programme and be internally commissioned to deliver the outcomes that KCC requires. The service will become more commercial and deliver the savings as outlined in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). The mobile library service is being reviewed as part of this programme.
- 1.2 The financial challenge facing Kent County Council over the next few financial years is significant and all services need to look at areas where savings can be made. LRA must save £1.3 million over the next three financial years.

- 1.3. The mobile library stops and routes have not been reviewed since 2004. It is now timely to review the service. The proposals presented in this paper will retain 80% of the current total mobile library visits. It is proposed that an annual review is then conducted to ensure that the service continues to reflect the needs of the communities it serves.

## **2. The Mobile Library Service**

- 2.1. The mobile library service consists of eleven mobile vehicles and one additional vehicle for use when others are off the road for essential maintenance. These vehicles deliver to 651 stops over Monday - Friday across all twelve districts of Kent.
- 2.2. These vehicles are a mini library on wheels. The mobile vehicles carry a range of books and our staff provide advice on how to access other KCC services. Our vehicles do not provide access to computers or the internet.
- 2.3. Currently there is not a consistent service across the mobile library stops; there is vast discrepancy in the length of stops ranging from ten minutes to over an hour and a half. Some stops are weekly, others fortnightly and a few monthly. Over time the routes have developed to the point that there are now inefficiencies in how they are organised, with mobile library routes crossing each other. The distances travelled and the number of short stops also adds to the wear and tear on the mobile vehicles themselves. The service does not operate on a Saturday currently which limits access outside of weekdays, and Monday stops are also impacted as no service is provided on bank holiday Mondays.
- 2.4. For the financial year 2014-15 the mobile library service cost £368,172 including staff salaries, maintenance costs and fuel. The average cost per visit of the mobile service is £6.11 which compares to the static library average of £3.83.
- 2.5. Visitor numbers have fallen by 20% over the last three financial years (from 2012/13 to 2014/15) while issues have fallen by 23% over the same period.
- 2.6. Over the period October 14 - September 15 visits to the mobiles totalled 58,600 with overall issues equating to 2.8% of total LRA issues. The busiest stop had an average of 27 visitors, while the lowest performing stop had no visitors. Furthermore 50% of our mobile library customers are also using at least one of the static libraries.

## **3. Mobile Service Redesign**

- 3.1. The service redesign proposals are based on two key elements;
  - **Usage**- officers have assessed current usage using specific criteria for the period October 14 - September 15.

- **New service** - working closely with KCC public transport and the research and intelligence team officers have considered the frequency of visits, duration of visits and routing. Better route planning has enabled a number of service improvements to be introduced- see section 5.

**Criteria to Assess Usage:**

3.2 In determining the criterion to be used for the review of the usage of the service, officers researched the threshold criteria and approaches used by other counties. Some authorities have reduced their mobile library service offer while others have or are proposing to withdraw the service completely. In reviewing their routes many used a threshold criteria of an average number of regular visitors while others also looked at distance from a static library. LRA considered these criteria for Kent in determining what would be the most appropriate to apply;

<b>Criteria options</b>	<b>Proposal rejected or recommended and reason</b>
(i)Take out stops within a mile of a static library	Rejected: It is proposed to keep stops that had received over 2 visitors on average between October 2014- September 2015 irrespective of their distance from the nearest static library. In this review it was decided to focus on actual usage which is a more customer focused criteria.
(ii) Only have one stop in a community	Rejected: It is proposed to keep all stops that are performing above the agreed criterion
(iii)Five visitors or less on average over the period October 14 - September 15	Rejected: The impact of this criterion was felt to be too high (580 stops) and difficult to cover via alternative service which would result in an imbalance of demand to the services we provide.
(iv)Two visitors or less on average over the period October 14- September 15	This criterion would impact on 368 stops Recommended: This was felt to be a reasonable balance between stop performance and what could be covered by the alternative service provision.

Taking the above into account the agreed proposed criterion is;

Stops that have received 2 or less visitors on average over the period October 14 - September 15 which will result in the withdrawal of stops in 368 locations.

3.3. The proposed distribution of stops and its impact by district is shown below:

District	Current number of static libraries	Current number of mobile stops	Proposed number of stops	District change
Ashford	6	92	50	-42
Canterbury	5	86	42	-44
Dartford	9	20	5	-15
Dover	6	80	30	-50
Gravesham	10	17	5	-12
Maidstone	11	85	43	-42
Sevenoaks	11	39	17	-22
Shepway	8	58	30	-28
Swale	7	55	23	-32
Thanet	8	42	11	-31
Tonbridge	9	47	15	-32
Tunbridge Wells	9	30	12	-18
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>651</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>-368</b>

3.4 The remaining stops would still retain **80%** of the current total mobile library visits and **77%** of the current total mobile library issues. For the 20% of customers not able to access the service through their current mobile stop there are a number of alternative ways to access the library service which are outlined in section 4.

#### 4. Alternative Ways of Accessing the Library Service

4.1 Whilst it is proposed that the number of mobile library stops is reduced, the impact of this reduction can be mitigated by alternative provision including:

- **Home library service-** Over the period October 2014-September 2015 there were just over 1,500 customers receiving this service. Through this offer a team of volunteers deliver books and other library items to a customer's home. A volunteer visits the customer to discuss reading tastes and requirements. Library staff/volunteers will, as they do already, then select suitable materials from a static library and a volunteer will drop off and collect these at agreed intervals. For older customers this alternative could represent a more bespoke and convenient service than the current mobile service.

LRA considers that the current Home library service could expand to cover additional demand. It is proposed that the potential take-up of this service is followed up through the engagement process to ensure demand is covered.

- **Touch a New World initiative** - Following a successful trial with Home Library Service customers, LRA have been rolling out the 'Touch a New World service'. This scheme offers the opportunity for housebound residents and their carers to have the assistance of an IT Buddy in their own home and borrow an iPad for a limited period as a taster to see how they find using one, to help them get online

and use the LRA online services. Using their library card and pin number, customers can use LRA eBook and eAudio book services or reserve the physical books of their choice from the online catalogue. The physical books can then be delivered and collected from the customers' home by the Home Library Service volunteers.

- **Static Libraries** - KCC has 99 library buildings across Kent which have a range of books, access to computers as well as a range of events, activities and other services. Through the static libraries or from a home computer, tablet or smart phone customers also have access to our online services. Customers using their library card and pin can access items held in Kent libraries including e-books. Items can also be requested and renewed online. Kent's online reference library offers over 50 free online subscriptions, including encyclopaedias, newspapers and e learning resources.

## **5. New Mobile Library Service**

5.1 In designing the new service, the routing, frequency of stops and duration of stops have each been reviewed and the following improvements and changes proposed:

- Changing the frequency of all stops to every two weeks. This would mean that everyone in Kent will have the same frequency of stop. For 80 of the proposed stops this will represent an improvement - the remainder will move to a fortnightly schedule but customers can take out up to 30 items at any one time and the period of loan will cover this change (Books are issued for 4 weeks and DVDs for 2 weeks).
- Increasing the minimum stop time from 10 minutes to 30 minutes to give customers more time to use the service. This would mean that over 50% of the proposed stops would increase their current stopping time. Stops that are already over the 30 minutes will keep the current stop length.
- Changing the days we operate the mobile libraries from Monday to Friday to Tuesday to Saturday. The benefit of this is that customers will not be inconvenienced by a loss of service on bank holiday Mondays. Having some stops on Saturday will give improved access to people who work Monday to Friday.

## **6. Financial Impact**

6.1 The direct cost of the service in the financial year 2014-15 including staff, fuel and maintenance was £368,172. It is estimated that the proposed changes to the service will mean that the routes can be delivered by 5 vehicles plus a spare, meaning a reduction of the current mobile fleet from 12 to 6 vehicles. This equates to an estimated revenue saving to KCC of approximately £150,000 per annum comprising staff and vehicle savings.

## **7. Proposed Public Engagement Exercise**

- 7.1. The proposed engagement programme will seek to engage with all mobile library users to make them aware of the proposals. This will give them the opportunity to comment on the criterion being proposed and the impact that the proposals will have on them and their ability to access the library service
- 7.2 All registered users of the mobile library service will receive a posted copy of the rationale and the proposal, as well as an A-Z of the proposed changes to all mobile stops specific to the district they live in so that all users can see the potential impact of the proposals on their mobile usage. There will also be a copy of the engagement questions that can be posted back using a freepost address.
- 7.3 The user engagement will take place for six weeks from Friday 22nd January 2016 and finish on 4th March 2016 (inclusive). The material will be available at each mobile library during this period. In addition, we will communicate with those Parish/Town councils currently serviced by the mobile library and ensure district councils know of the proposals. The material will also be available on the kent.gov website.
- 7.4 Following the end of the engagement a full analysis and report will be completed by Lake Market Research who have been appointed to evaluate the returns. The analysis and reports will then be considered by the Cabinet Member for Communities before a final decision is taken and any changes to the mobile service implemented. As part of this process, the Cabinet Member will consider whether the proposed criteria should be amended prior to any changes being implemented.
- 7.5 It is also recommended that whatever criteria are agreed to review the service that these are then used for the annual operational review of the mobile service.
- 7.6. The LRA service will continue to look at the opportunities for partners to utilise the mobile service and other parts of the service to reach communities and provide wider access to services to customers.

## **8. Legal Implications**

- 8.1 Local library authorities are under a statutory duty to provide a free and comprehensive library service. Should they not do so, there is a risk of legal challenge by way of judicial review brought by users of the service, and/or a statutory inquiry by the Secretary of State under the relevant legislation. There will be a perceived if not actual impact on some protected groups if there is a reduction, particularly those who live in the more remote areas of Kent. It is therefore important to show that Kent County Council has at least considered whether the alternative methods of access are capable of coping with any increased volume of demand. By illustrating the reality of the low usage of some stops, and the effectiveness of the mitigation proposed, Kent County Council is able to establish that it is continuing to provide a comprehensive service.

8.2 LRA has taken advice from the consultation team and the approach outlined for user engagement is in line with the council's policy to consult with customers where it is proposing a major change to service.

## **9. Equalities Impact Assessment**

9.1 A full equalities impact assessment has been completed (Appendix B) to ensure consideration is given to the impact of the redesign of the mobile service on different groups of people. This initial assessment indicates that any impact on users could be reasonably mitigated. However this provisional view will be tested through the mobile user engagement exercise.

## **10. Recommendation**

### **Recommendation:**

The Growth, Environment and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to consider and endorse, or make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Community Services on the proposed decision to undertake a customer engagement exercise with mobile library customers on proposed route efficiencies, service improvements and changes as attached at Appendix A

**11. Attachments:** Appendix A- Proposed Decision Sheet  
Appendix B- Equality impact assessment for the mobile redesign

## **12. Contact details**

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