

Fury at cuts to library opening hours

Edinburgh councillors have reacted furiously after being presented with plans to reduce opening hours at some city libraries, despite them voting against the move just last year.

Officers were accused of putting elected members in a “very difficult position” and acting “dangerously” by seeking approval for a consultation on changes to library service times against their expressed wish.

Council officers say the library estate could be “maximised” by “redistributing” operational hours across the city – closing some branches earlier and others later.

All options currently on the table, set out in a report, would result in “an overall net increase to opening hours across the city” and save the cash-strapped authority between £70,000 and £225,000 a year.

However as councillors agreed to review the library service to develop a new “strategy and vision” in December, they agreed it should not lead to any being closed or having their opening hours reduced.

Cllr Phil Daggart said he was left “a little confused” as the report went before the Culture and communities committee on Thursday.

"The motion is very clear," he said, "no libraries to be closed or have their opening hours reduced as a result of the review. That is really quite straightforward. That is no library. But yet in the report we are being asked to reconsider."

Under standing orders a decision made by councillors cannot be changed within six months.

Cllr Dan Heap said: "That's something we indicated on the 7th of December that we didn't want. So doesn't this fall under the six month rule?"

Libraries chief Evelyn Kilmurry said the plan was "purely about redistributing, I suppose, opening hours across the city".

She told councillors after weighing up all evidence gathered from initial engagement with the public and library staff officials felt it was appropriate to include adjusting hours in the next consultation.

"We have a responsibility to make sure our services are reaching as many people as possible and are as successful as possible and as well as that are financially sustainable," she said, adding: "I'm conscious that the options here do, for some communities, result in a reduction in opening hours."

The report said the "majority" of public library staff who indicated opening hours could be improved "suggested a reduction to evening hours based on their perceptions of low use".

Cllr Doggart asked if officers were saying councillors "got it wrong" and were now asking them to "change their minds".

He added: "I think this is really important, actually, and I think this is an important principle for the committee.

"The decision was taken in December – no libraries closing, no

changes to opening hours – we're now being asked five months later to reverse that decision.

"That I think is very dangerous. And it's putting us in a very difficult position. If you're saying that evidence is now available that this is different, I accept that.

"But whether officers like it or not councillors made a democratic decision and I think it is challenging to expect elected members to accept a proposal which was thrown out five months ago. Challenging, I also think it's dangerous. I think it creates a precedent and it should not be considered until at least six months have gone by."

Joan Parr, director of culture and well-being, said: "We did consider this closely, but it was as the evidence, as we were gathering evidence, and we saw that reduction in usage of the libraries after five o'clock, after six o'clock, after seven o'clock and thinking about the financial implications of that across the city given the financial pressures libraries are under, we thought there was a case to bring back to committee."

Cllr Val Walker, Labour culture and communities convener, said she also "felt very strongly that overall we didn't want a reduction in opening hours" was "comfortable with putting out to consultation the suggestion that over all of the city there's no reduction in opening hours".

She added: "Some individual libraries that have longer opening hours could close an hour earlier and that time, rather than being lost in terms of libraries, would be reallocated to the libraries with shorter opening hours. That is very much for consultation and it might not be supported."

The committee agreed to refer the report to the next full council meeting on June 27 for a final decision.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter

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