

CONGLETON TOWN COUNCIL
COMMITTEE REPORTS AND UPDATES

COMMITTEE:	Emergency Council Meeting		
MEETING DATE AND TIME	29 June 20223 7.00pm	LOCATION	Town Hall, Bridestones
REPORT FROM	David McGifford, Chief Officer		
AGENDA ITEM REPORT TITLE	5. Cheshire East Libraries Consultation – Congleton		
Background	<p>Cheshire East Council is consulting on proposals to reduce the current opening hours of libraries across the borough. They are proposing to close all libraries across the borough for at least 1.5 days during the week to deliver £886,000 worth of savings over the next 2 years, 2023/24 and 2024/25.</p> <p>This will mean libraries that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently not closed in the week will close for a day and a half e.g. Alsager, Congleton, Crewe, Macclesfield, Nantwich, Poynton, Sandbach & Wilmslow • Currently closed for 0.5 days in the week will close for an additional day e.g. Holmes Chapel & Knutsford • Currently closed for 1 day in the week will close for an additional half day e.g. Bollington, Handforth & Middlewich • Currently closed for 1.5 days or more in the week will stay as they are e.g. Alderley Edge, Disley, Prestbury <p>Cheshire East Council has launched a consultation with suggestions on how the saving could be implemented. The consultation is open until 9 July. Cheshire East Council needs to bridge a £20m funding gap. the Libraries Service Review has a target saving of £886k. Following the consultation on the Medium Term Financial Strategy, Cheshire East Council dropped the plans to remove the mobile library service and has retained the Saturday and evening library opening times. Cheshire East says it appreciates how valuable libraries are to local communities, but savings must be made and they have no choice but to change the way in which they operate.</p> <p>The consultation also asks the public for suggestions about how they think the council could generate further income to enable libraries to be kept open longer and for comments on how library provision should be delivered in local areas.</p> <p>Cheshire East is also seeking expressions of interest from town and parish councils to explore ways of working together to deliver library services in the area.</p>		

The proposals for Congleton is to: **Reduce from 46 hours to 34 hours a week closing half day on Wednesday and all day on Friday. Savings per ½ day closed is £20,413. Option for CTC to raise funds to ‘buy back’ the days for the community.**

Stats from CEC libraries

Library	Visitor Numbers	Issues	Registered Library Members	Computer Use (Hours)	Council Enquiries	Adult Event Attendees	Child Event Attendees
Alderley Edge	9,559	10,904	1,553	89	119	187	1,980
Alsager	64,368	111,375	5,950	1,281	2,663	1,109	6,671
Bollington	23,069	66,392	3,258	515	339	981	5,490
Congleton	97,262	133,823	8,970	3,344	2,863	2,184	9,201
Crewe	154,399	184,620	15,592	7,942	2,968	1,924	16,046
Disley	30,530	25,119	1,697	469	219	409	4,141
Handforth	29,092	45,849	4,000	1,084	629	588	3,541
Holmes Chapel	59,926	92,830	4,415	1,221	496	1,362	4,508
Knutsford	60,051	112,382	6,355	1,588	2,297	1,984	7,939
Macclesfield	154,960	264,863	18,338	6,634	3,229	2,117	9,485
Middlewich	36,556	53,693	3,993	1,332	476	761	6,216
Nantwich	127,614	170,710	10,678	2,355	2,729	3,008	8,660
Poynton	48,486	135,924	6,782	1,139	708	421	7,601
Prestbury	1,233	3,068	119	18	0	0	0
Sandbach	69,219	119,084	7,660	2,137	1,320	394	6,428
Wilmslow	89,981	155,352	9,067	2,449	1,653	795	9,264
Mobile Library	4,685	38,836	533	0	0	0	0
Period	1st June 2022 to 31st May 2023	1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023	1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023	1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023	1st June 2022 to 31st May 2023	1st June 2022 to 31st May 2023	1st June 2022 to 31st May 2023

Issues Councillors may wish to consider as part of the response

Impact on the Well-being of the Community

Congleton Library is so much more than a place to borrow books. It is a community hub for the town. It is the largest *warm space* in Congleton which plays a major role in the cost of living crisis. Congleton Library is effectively the face of Cheshire East Council for Congleton and the surrounding parishes, handling almost 134,000 issues per year and locals use almost 3,400 computer hours a year within the library. It is the place to go for blue badges, bus passes, DBS checks and a wide range of essential support. For many, the library is a safe space where they can feel safe and secure. It is hard to ascertain the impact that losing over a quarter of the library time (26% reduction) will have on the community and the ability for the usage to be condensed into 34 hours.

Impact on learning of young people

Covid-19 had a devastating effect on the young and learning particularly those from the least affluent backgrounds. A recent report [Public Libraries and Literacy Recovery](#) shows the importance of libraries at this time to help bridge the literacy gap.

Isobel Hunter MBE, chief executive of Libraries Connected, said:

“This report demonstrates the powerful role libraries can and do play in developing children’s reading and communications skills. Public libraries must be front and centre of local and national strategies to close the post-

pandemic literacy gap, working in partnership with schools and nurseries to ensure all children have a great start in life.”

Jonathan Douglas, chief executive of National Literacy Trust, said:

“Libraries are a fundamental tool in our mission to close the attainment and literacy gap between pupils from lower and higher income backgrounds. They give children and young people a safe and quiet space to discover the joys of reading for pleasure, which helps them gain strong literacy skills and fulfil their potential as adults. We are delighted to be working with Libraries Connected to put libraries at the forefront of the national conversation on post-pandemic recovery and the Levelling Up agenda.”

Congleton had over 9,200 visits by young people in the past year.

Impact on Equality and Inclusion

Removing this service is likely to impact those most in need. Speaking to library staff, computers are often used by people looking for work or students studying. Many people no longer have access to computers and tablets and filling in job applications and forms on a mobile phone is difficult. People also come into the library to charge their phones and receive advice. Congleton has the second highest number of adult-attended events of all libraries. Although Cheshire East has attempted to treat all towns equally, in reality, the 1.5 day closing is likely to have the biggest impact on the larger towns where the libraries are serving many thousands of people and areas of greater deprivation.

Impact on the Town Centre

The library attracts 97,262 visitors a year (2022/23 figure). It has toilets which members of the public can use, and a meeting room downstairs which can be booked out and two smaller rooms upstairs. Reducing the library’s opening hours will impact footfall in the town and also remove access to a public toilet by the bus station.

Long-term viability of the Building

Can we have any reassurances from CEC that the cuts will stop here? Congleton library is a big building to only be open 34 hours a week. This is also an opportunity lost to raise income as the meeting rooms will not be available when the library is closed. We have been told by Cheshire East Council that there are no further plans to review library service provision beyond this process.

Is Friday the best day to close?

The days have been chosen to geographically make sure that there are some libraries open at all times. Congleton has been placed in a group with Alsager and the mobile libraries. This could be questioned. The mobile library could be anywhere in the borough and only makes one visit to the parishes surrounding Congleton (Eaton) on every third Thursday. The mobile library does not operate

	<p>within 2 miles of a main library. There are only three buses from Congleton bus stop to Alsager per day which takes almost an hour. It is easier for Congleton residents to visit library services in Sandbach or Macclesfield libraries – but CEC is proposing to also close Macclesfield on a Friday and reduce Sandbach to half day on a Friday. To allow access to the services, if the library must close for an additional 12 hours it may be better to look at a different day or more half days?</p> <p>Growing and Expanding Town</p> <p>Congleton is set to grow further over the next three-four years, although most of these houses will be in the parishes, rather than the town boundary, they will be using the services of Congleton and it may be appropriate to seek the views of the parishes on this important issue. (This is one of the reasons why Congleton is arguing that the Boundary Review should have put the new homes within the link road into the town, so that there was extra revenue to help support services). The increase in population – from around 28,000 to 38,000 will mean an increased demand for services such as the library.</p>
<p>Options</p>	<p>Councillors may wish to consider a range of options.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accept CEC proposal to close Congleton Library for ½ day Wednesday and Friday as outlined in the consultation. 2. Propose alternative times for the 12 hours of library closures eg/ open two hours later each day or close from 1pm – 3pm each day, or more half days. 3. Propose alternative times for some of the CEC 12 hours of library time closures and find funding to retain some of the hours 4. Pay for 12 hours of library time so that the current hours can be retained. 5. Discuss options to take on more of the library hours than the 12 hours being discussed. <p>In all scenarios encourage local residents to respond to the consultation.</p> <p>The Chief Officer has indicated to Cheshire East Council that the Town Council is interested in exploring options with them, as it was felt only right that we have as much information as possible to share with Councillors. Responses to the consultation are needed by the 9th July.</p>
<p>Financial Implications</p>	<p>The figure we have been given by Cheshire East is £20,413 per annum for each ½ day that Congleton wishes to pay to keep the library open. This would be for a 3-year period starting in the financial year 2024/25. It equates to 22.5 hours of staff time per ½ day session.</p>
<p>Environmental Implications</p>	<p>Minimal environmental footprint saving by closing for 1.5 days as the building is still heated and the resources are still purchased for the service. Loss of facility for the Community.</p>
<p>Equality and Diversity Impact</p>	<p>The closure is likely to disproportionately affect those with the greatest needs. The library is the town’s biggest warm space and safe space for people. Many people rely on the computers for form filling, job searching and the advice given by the</p>

	staff acting as the 'one-stop-shop' for all Cheshire East related enquiries. It is one of the busiest libraries per head of population.
PROPOSALS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For officers to further explore options with Cheshire East Council to enable retain all or some of the hours which CEC is planning to close Congleton library and to report to the Council. 2. To seek engagement with the parish councils and other funding bodies to see what additional support there may be to work together to keep Congleton library open for all or some of the 12 hours being proposed to be cut to make savings. 3. To respond to Cheshire East Consultation expressing concerns about well-being, proportionality, ability to deliver within condensed hours, equality impact, impact on the town centre, impact on children learning, impact on long-term viability of the building if only open 34 hours a week and any suggestions about the opening hours.