

Proposed Community Plus & Community Libraries

Oxfordshire County Council is consulting on a proposal that each of Oxfordshire's 43 libraries continue to receive support in the form of free access to a suitable building, to book stock, to the library stock management system, to the expertise of county council employed library staff and to operate to the library service's standards and policies.

Under the proposal, communities are being asked to step forward and support their library by becoming volunteers:

- in some libraries to enable the service to save 1/3rd of its staffing budget - Chinnor, Faringdon, Grove, Wheatley and Woodstock (Community Plus Libraries)
- and
- in others, two thirds of its staffing budget - Adderbury, Bampton, Benson, Burford, Charlbury, Deddington, Goring, Hook Norton, Kennington, North Leigh, Old Marston, Sonning Common, Stonesfield, Watlington, Woodcote and Wychwood (Community Libraries)

What can a volunteer do?

A volunteer will have a role across the complete range of tasks and activities which take place in a library on a day to day basis.

- For some of these tasks and activities, a volunteer will be able to work independently;
- For others, some support or guidance will be required from the County Council's staff; and
- Some tasks will continue to remain the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council's staff.

This is why we are retaining a level of operational management support in all branches – in some branches it is 2/3rds and in others 1/3rd.

In addition, all branches will have the support of professionally qualified librarians in the way that they do now to ensure the book stock is maintained to our current standards.

A detailed task description is being drawn up.

How does this work in practice?

There are 4 main areas of work where the volunteer will have a role:

- Dealing with the day to day issuing, renewal and return of books and other items, including the related financial transactions
- Handling enquiries
- Ensuring the bookstock is displayed attractively and meets the requirements of the community and the county, as all stock forms part of the county's collection
- Supporting library promotional activities such as rhyme times, class visits, Summer Reading scheme

Draft statement subject to approval

Installing self-service into the community libraries will enable volunteers to easily handle the issue, renewal and return of books, if the reader does not wish to actually carry out these transactions for themselves. This self-service system is currently operating in a number of our larger libraries with 97% of those transactions that can be handled in this way being handled by our customers using the system. We should be very happy to arrange for Friends Groups to visit one of these libraries where it can be demonstrated – Abingdon, Banbury, Bicester, Cowley, Didcot, Henley, Kidlington, Oxford Central Library, Thame, Wantage, Wallingford, Watlington, and Witney.

In the day to day handling of these transactions, the volunteer will play a major part either by supporting customers to use the system or doing it for them. The volunteer can however only access the lower levels of this system – should there be a query on a user's account, then our staff will resolve those to ensure the integrity of the system and the confidentiality of the data.

Likewise the volunteer will handle the associated income through the collection of fines and reservation charges on a daily basis from our customers. But our managers will retain the related higher level responsibility for cashing up; maintaining the statistical records and banking

Volunteers will be able to handle many of the enquiries which are made – either by using the stock in the library, supporting customers to use the public computers or by referring the enquiry onto a member of the County Council's staff.

If we do not have a member of staff in the library at the time such a query arises, then some of these may be able to be left to await their return or through a 'buddy' communication system which we shall set up for all community libraries, the volunteer will find the necessary support to be able to handle it.

Why a buddy system? We do not want a situation to arise in any library where a volunteer does not know what to do and does not have a very clear chain of communication and support to follow. A community library will therefore have its nearest core library as a buddy and will have a very clear network of support contacts to route through any enquires be they related to a customer's borrowing account; a procedure to follow or an information enquiry.

All community libraries will have the support of professionally trained librarians to ensure the high standard of our bookstock is maintained. The main responsibility therefore for the maintenance of the books in the library will rest with the librarians' team and the library manager. However under their support and guidance, volunteers will be able to help with the display of the bookstock and from their regular contact with customers, make recommendations for items to be purchased. But the overall control and responsibility for the bookstock will rest with Oxfordshire County Council's librarians, as it is one county wide book stock collection and maintenance of that collection to its current high standard will ensure the continued use of the library.

What is the Role of the Friends Group?

The Friends Group is the natural focus in the community for the volunteers – and it would be their role to recruit, select and manage the volunteers in terms of organising the daily rota of cover for the library. We will support the Friends by putting in place a Community Libraries Co-ordinator who will support the Groups to ensure the successful recruitment of suitable volunteers and maintain a strong working relationship between the Friends Group and the library service. A possible approach for the Friends Group to consider would be to appoint one or two of its members to act as our main contacts.

The Friends Group do not have to have a full complement of volunteers in place for April 2012 – we would have 3 years to implement the proposal and we would look to work this through in detail together over that time.

What is the Friends Group being asked to provide?

If this proposal is accepted, the library service will have an identified financial saving to make in each library. This will mean that we will only have a budget to pay for one third of the staffing hours that we currently put into the library – some of those hours are of course currently spent on tasks which take place outside of library opening hours. The Friends Group will need to think about supplementing our staffing by slightly more than 2/3 rds* of the opening hours – as of course people will need to be there before the library opens to open it up and likewise at the end of the day to close it down.

It is also quite likely that volunteers will come forward with very different skills. The Friends Group may wish to take advantage of those skills to the benefit of the community and have more than the required number of volunteers in the library at any one time so that for example someone who has very good IT skills could be dedicated to supporting people to access/search the internet rather than assisting with self service. It would be preferable for volunteers to support one another by working in pairs to avoid being on their own.

(* or 1/3rd in the case of Chinnor, Faringdon, Grove, Wheatley and Woodstock)

The County Council will arrange for the necessary CRB check but the Friends Group would be required to meet the administration fee for it - £11.00. The Friends Group will not be required to fund either the training of volunteers – a full induction programme will be provided - or the installation and maintenance of the self-service system.

Oxfordshire Libraries
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