

Proposal to move Central Library services to Stockroom.

Consultation from 23rd August to 18th October 2021

FAQs

1. What is this all about?

The Council are consulting with people to understand the level of support and impact on them if library services currently provided in Central Library relocated into the new Stockroom development in Merseyway. Stockroom would offer an enhanced, 21st Century library in the heart of the town centre.

All the feedback will be used to inform any decisions made on this proposal.

The consultation is running between the 23rd August and the 18th October 2021 and it is likely that a decision will be made by the Council later this year.

We are asking people to complete a short questionnaire to understand people's views on the proposed move.

2. What is Central Library?

Central Library was opened in 1913 and has operated as the Town Centre library since then. It was built with money donated by Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. Its original design incorporated lecture halls, a reference room and a ladies reading room. It now offers a range of services including, but not limited to; book loans; computer and Wi-Fi access; heritage and archive material access; activities and events; council advice and support services.

3. What is Stockroom?

Stockroom is the working title for a project to create a new 21st century, universal learning and discovery space at the heart of Merseyway. In 2019, the Government launched the Future High Streets Fund (FHSF) with the aim of renewing and reshaping high streets up and down the country.

Stockport has received £14.5m from the FHSF to repurpose a large area of vacant retail space in the Merseyway Shopping Centre around Adlington Walk. As town centres across the UK struggle to recover from the decline in traditional retailing and the impact of Covid-19, Stockport is pioneering an innovative plan to encourage footfall and vibrancy in the town centre.

Located on Adlington Walk and redeveloping 8 vacant retail units, Stockroom will create a fantastic new arrival point for the town centre, clustered around brand new toilets and customer facilities. Stockroom will be a place to celebrate the rich culture, creativity and diversity of Stockport, a place where the past, present and future come together. Stockroom will be a place to spend time exploring with friends and family, children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents.

4. What do you mean by a “21st century library offer”?

Over recent years, in the context of declining visitor numbers to libraries nationally, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and other national bodies have set out their vision for modern 21st Century library services. In particular the government published in 2016, ‘Libraries Deliver – an ambition for public library services’. This set out a vision for libraries that is summed up by a quote from Malorie Blackman, the Children’s Laureate 2013 to 2015.

“What do libraries do for us? Well, they introduce many into the world of literacy and learning and help to make it a lifelong habit; they equalise; they teach empathy and help us to learn about each other; they preserve our cultural heritage; they protect our right to know and to learn; they build communities; they strengthen and advance us as a nation; they empower us as individuals.”

There are plenty of examples up and down the country, of where libraries have been re-imagined and cultural and learning spaces have been located in the heart of the High Street, bringing a range of attractions and services together in a modern and welcoming environment. Where this has happened, more people have visited and benefitted from those spaces and the national trend of decline in library usage has been reversed.

5. Why are you proposing this?

The way people use libraries and their expectations of public services are changing, we need to respond to this and at the same time, help rejuvenate the High Street. A 21st Century library, with all the benefits and visitors it could bring, would be a real boost to the shops and businesses already in the town, and help to make our High Street more attractive to shops and business in the future who may want to set up in Stockport.

Nationally library visitor numbers have been declining over the past decade. Stockport Central library has seen visitor numbers fall by almost half (42%) from April 2012 to March 2020. In addition, loans have fallen 35% among 10 to 14-year-olds between April 2017 and March 2020, while loans have fallen 61% among 15 to 19-year-olds between April 2017 and March 2020.

The Council believe Stockroom will be able to attract more people to use the fantastic services our libraries provide. Where other local authorities have re-imagined their library services for the 21st Century there has been a substantial uptake in the use of those services.

6. Why can’t all of this be provided from the Central Library building?

The layout of the building was suitable for how people used libraries through much of the 20th Century. However, the way the building is laid out and the investment needed make it a challenge to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service, fit for the 21st Century, from the building.

The Heritage and Archive library is also only on a provisional accreditation and Place of Deposit status as the Archive Service Accreditation assessment identified risks in current storage that could damage the local heritage collections. Stockroom will provide a brand new

storage facility for our heritage archives, one that is kitted-out with everything needed to retain our accreditation, as well as improving public access to the collections.

The rules governing how the Future High Streets Fund money can be spent mean spending it on refurbishing Central Library is not possible. The money must be spent on supporting the High Street and repurposing vacant retail space.

It is important to note that this is a government award which has been given to Stockport Council and this investment will not mean less Council investment in any of our community library buildings across the borough.

Local Authorities across the country are still coming to terms with the financial impact of the pandemic and Stockport is not alone in facing financial pressures that have brought on by the pandemic. Therefore, it is not possible for the Council to fund a major redevelopment of the Central Library building, and at present, there are no external funding streams available for the level of capital investment the building requires.

7. What will happen to the Central Library building if the Council decide to move the library service?

Should the decision be made to relocate the library service from the Central Library building, the Council will explore potential future uses for this much loved and important part of the town's heritage.

The Council has already the following comments in respect of the building:

- it will not demolish or abandon the building
- it will not sell the freehold to it so that the long term of control of the building remains with the Council for the residents of Stockport
- it will not allow the building to be developed for residential use as this would mean the public losing access to this heritage asset
- any potential use will ensure that public access can be retained to the building

If the decision is made to relocate the library service to Stockroom, it is anticipated that the earliest date that the library would relocate is in the Summer of 2023. The service will be retained in the building until this date.

Given that it may be two years before any potential new use could even begin to fit out the building, it is very early stages in considering what that use might be. However the initial work that the Council has undertaken and will continue to work on between now and the end of the year has highlighted a number of potential uses based on experience of what other buildings of this nature have been used as elsewhere and what there might be demand for. Further details of what these uses could be are included within the questionnaire.

8. Why can't you just bring back more shops back to Merseyway?

Stockport, like many towns and cities across the country, has lost major household names such as Debenhams, Top Shop, Thorntons, and Mothercare. These iconic names will not return to the High Street. This has left a large number of vacant retail units, many with multiple floors. Empty shops don't contribute to making the High Street a place we all want to go and spend time in, so the challenge is to find new ways of using those spaces for something else.

The recent news about the redevelopment of the former M&S and BHS stores will help make our High Street more attractive for those retailers who are still looking to expand. Big High Street names are responsible to their shareholders and are private businesses, the council can't force them to open in Stockport but we can help to create the right conditions for business that are here to thrive and attract new shops and businesses to the town.

Shops like to open where there is animation, vibrancy and people! We strongly believe this proposal will help bring people back into Stockport Town Centre, support the businesses that are still here and provide a great incentive for new businesses to come to Stockport.

9. Why have you called it Stockroom?

'Stockroom' is just a working title for the project, (we had to call it something!). Once everyone has a clearer idea of what Stockroom will include, we will be in a better position to name the building. This could involve engaging with people to decide the actual name of Stockroom in early 2022 when the plans for Stockroom have progressed further.

10 What about One Stockport Hub?

One Stockport Hub (OSH) was opened to provide a town centre library offer, albeit in a reduced form, whilst the pandemic prevented the opening of Central Library. Library services moved back to Central Library on 19th July 2021. One Stockport Hub continues to operate but it is envisaged that once Stockroom opens by Summer 2023, it will include everything that is offered at One Stockport Hub and the unit it is currently occupied by OSH on Mersey Square would return to a commercial use.