

Public Questions
Scrutiny for Policies and Place – 24 October 2018

Item 5 Library Service Redesign

Cllr Dave Mansell, Save Wivey Library Group -

The Save Wivey Library group asks the Scrutiny Committee to recommend to the Cabinet that Wiveliscombe Library be included in the list of libraries to continue to be operated and funded by the County Council.

Peter Murphy, Chair, Friends of Somerset Libraries (FoSL)

FRIENDS OF SOMERSET LIBRARIES (FOSL) was formed when Somerset County Council (SCC) threatened the closure of eleven libraries in the previous review of the Library service. In a successful Judicial Review judgement, the judge declared the decision taken as an “example of bad government” and the decisions were quashed with costs awarded against SCC.

Since then, FOSL has engaged with SCC and perhaps acted as a critical friend towards the latest review of Library services in the build up to the consultation but has not hesitated to challenge the evolving proposals.

FOSL recognise that there has been extensive consultation with communities and that there is a commitment to continue this in order to establish Community Library Partnerships, which we do not oppose. We remain opposed to the replacement professional staff with volunteers and see the latter as complementing the work of trained staff.

In order to get CLPs established with the maximum chance of being sustainable FOSL believe that all CLPs should be funded, not just the eight recommended in your papers today. FOSL has showed officers how that could be achieved but that advice has not been heeded.

When the Library proposals were published on 16 October, FOSL prepared a Press Release which I attach to this statement for your information and hope that it gives you further background on our constructive engagement with the SCC Library Service.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the Northampton Libraries judgement referred to in the Press Release. Here, the Council decided to change their Library proposals as the full extent of the financial position of the Council became clear. The judge made a ruling on the “comprehensive and efficient” requirement of the 1964 Libraries and Museums Act doubting that the new proposals would meet that test. FOSL are concerned that, amongst other possible grounds, there could be grounds for legal challenge where a library building is replaced by mobile provision against the wishes of the community where the present library is sited as we believe that this may fail the “comprehensive and efficient” test.

The 2011 Judicial Review judgment awarded costs against SCC and FOSL

retain these funds for possible future legal challenge. We are in contact with our legal advisors at the present time.

FOSL would urge that communities and the Council exercise maximum flexibility and good faith to permit Community Library Partnerships to be established where possible, which includes more equitable funding than currently provided for.

(Attached Press Statement)

FRIENDS OF SOMERSET LIBRARIES

Statement for release embargoed until 16 October 2018

Friends of Somerset Libraries (FOSL) was formed when Somerset County Council (SCC) threatened the closure of eleven libraries in the previous review of the Library service. In a successful Judicial Review judgement, the judge declared the decision taken as an “example of bad government” and the decisions were quashed with costs awarded against SCC.

Since then, FOSL has engaged with SCC and acted as a constructive and critical friend towards the latest review of Library services in the build up to the consultation but has not hesitated to challenge proposals. A summary of the points made follows:

- FoSL accept that the County Council are under financial pressure, but feel that the library service has already made significant savings in recent years, and urge the county council to find alternative means of achieving overall budget savings without further cuts to library budgets.
- FoSL strongly believe there should be no consequential threat of closure if Community Library Partnerships cannot be established. They are firmly opposed to library closures in Somerset, and believe that there is no case for closing libraries.
- If cost reductions must be found from the libraries service, FoSL have suggested that:
 - the County Council give consideration to a ‘Community Support’ model as an alternative to Community Library Partnerships, where the County Council remain responsible for library buildings, but communities offer to support libraries financially, or by taking on certain responsibilities, but with no consequential threat of closure.
 - an alternative approach to risking library closures would be to reduce opening hours; FoSL have requested that SCC consider making some cost savings contribution from reduced opening hours at larger libraries.
- FoSL feel that there should be a more equitable distribution of funding to support all Community Library Partnerships, and that the contributions proposed in the consultation should be increased. FoSL have made a further suggestion that county council contributions to Community Library Partnerships could be used to ‘leverage’ investment in staffing, perhaps through a match funding arrangement.
- FoSL believe that volunteers should only be used to support professional staff and to complement and extend the library service, not to act as a replacement.

- FoSL have suggested that the County Council should consider broadening the funding base for libraries, through community engagement, fund-raising, donations and other forms of community support.
- FoSL have raised a number of concerns about the County Council's cost accounting. The Library Service Re-design project team have provided various sets of financial information to FoSL and FoSL representatives, and FoSL have scrutinised this information. FoSL remain concerned that Community Library Partnerships, and the Library Service more generally, may end up bearing an unreasonable level of cost overheads
- In the event SCC decide to close a library because a CLP cannot be established, and substitute outreach and/or mobile services, FOSL do not accept that these would necessarily provide an ongoing 'comprehensive and efficient statutory service' as required under relevant act, and may be legally challengeable.'

In conclusion, FOSL are aware of the recent Judicial Review taken against Library service cuts proposed in Northamptonshire as a knee jerk reaction to a crisis in local government funding. Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, councils have a statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service. In that case Justice Yip recognised the real (sic) ruled that the council had failed to consider properly whether it would be able to operate a comprehensive and efficient library service, as required by law, after the closures had taken effect.

FOSL will continue to engage with SCC to protect the highly valued Library service in Somerset.

John Irvén, Treasurer, Watchet Library Friends -

Watchet Library Friends was established in 2011 to support wider library use and campaign for the saving of Watchet library when it was scheduled for closure. We were part of the Friends of Somerset Libraries legal challenge taken in the name of a disadvantaged Watchet resident and continue to support their current position. The judgment resulted in the quashing of the decision, and Watchet has remained open since as a vital resource for local people, especially isolated individuals and those less able to access library facilities or travel elsewhere. The library is a key facility on Watchet Esplanade, the Town's community space.

We have urged SCC to find savings elsewhere, as since 2011 all libraries remained open whilst saving your original target. However, we have supported Watchet Town Council's aim to establish a Community Library Partnership and the joint letter of intent recently executed with SCC.

We do not believe in entirely volunteer run libraries. Volunteers can only complement, not replace staff, who provide a key resource skill set. Therefore, we endorse the 'Community Supported Library' model where they are still run by SCC and staff, whilst being supported by the local community. We sympathise with other communities less able to establish these because they lack resources & skills or finance. We urge SCC to find more generous and equitable ways to support all communities struggling to establish

community library partnerships, which should be done without the threat of consequential closure.

We do not accept that replacement by mobile and/or outreach alternatives will provide a comprehensive and efficient service as required under the 1964 act, and do not agree with SCC statements that the changes are to enhance the service, but rather to meet budget cut targets. Therefore, we question why has SCC not considered increasing precept to cover shortfalls, if necessary asking communities if they are prepared to pay, rather than passing costs down to local parish level and asking them to do it all. We feel overhead costs are being unfairly allocated to CLPs, particularly from our experience of the inconsistencies in SCC cost accounting.

We also ask SCC to help ensure that the asset transfer of the Watchet library building from WSDC to WTC occurs, a condition of WTC support.

Jan Karpinski, Friends of Shepton Mallet Library –

On behalf of the Friends of Shepton Mallet Library I would like to ask the Committee whether it will please bear in mind that 'Libraries Matter', the wishes of the people of Shepton Mallet and other pertinent points (which I will briefly outline).

Cllr J Hardy – Shepton Mallet Town Council

Since the original announcement that, on grounds of financial expediency, the Library Service's preferred option was to move the Shepton library to an as yet unbuilt facility at the Mendip District council's office in the SHAPE complex, Shepton Mallet Town Council and the Friends of Shepton Mallet Library have been developed a business plan that will allow SCC to keep the Library in the Town Centre where the vast majority of residents and local business wish it to stay. The report before you acknowledges this fact.

The Business Plan demonstrates that it is possible for the Library to be funded at either of the SMTC's alternative options in the Town Centre at the same cost as at SHAPE with the additional bonus of an immediate saving in one-off costs of nearly £40,000 to SCC.

In view of this would this committee welcome a presentation by SMTC regarding the Business Plan (which is currently being refined) so that SCC can make a more informed decision regarding the future of the Library at Shepton?

Steve Barlow - Children who develop a love of books at an early age are likely to become committed adult readers who will ensure the future of the library service. Besides developing a love of story, they will learn valuable lessons about the world and their place in it.

Therefore, in developing Community Library Partnerships in Somerset, would this committee agree that it is vital that community librarians are trained by the Library Service to respond to the needs of young readers, developing an understanding of which titles may be suitable for a range of ages and abilities and knowing how to guide young readers to books that

will assist their development and appeal to their imagination?

Will the committee further agree that ongoing staff development should be available so that community librarians' knowledge remains up to date, and that Community Libraries should seek help and advice from bodies such as the Federation of Children's Books Groups to ensure that the children who use their libraries have ready access to appropriate reading materials and sound advice that will help them develop their reading skills and widen their experience of literature?