

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 July 2011

Present:-

Members of the Committee

Councillor Sarah Boad
“ Richard Chattaway
“ Michael Doody
“ Mike Gittus
“ Barry Lobbett
“ Tilly May
“ Chris Saint
“ Ray Sweet
“ Helen Walton
“ John Whitehouse (Chair)

Other County Councillors

Councillor Peter Butlin (Portfolio Holder for Transport and Highways)
Councillor Alan Cockburn (Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Communities)
Councillor Jim Foster
Councillor Colin Hayfield (Portfolio Holder for Customers, Access and Physical Assets)
Councillor Richard Hobbs (Portfolio Holder for Community Safety)
Councillor John Ross

Officers Adrienne Bellingeri, Customer Contact Manager
Kushal Birla, Head of Customer Service
David Carter, Strategic Director, Resources Group
Richard Harkin, Communications Officers, News & Public Affairs
Ayub Khan, Head of Libraries - Strategy
Ann Mawdsley, Principal Committee Administrator
Michelle McHugh, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Linda Smith, Head of Libraries - Operations

Also in Attendance

Robin Aird, Dunchurch Parish Council
Mike Downes, WhatsinKenilworth.com

1. General

The Chair welcomed everyone to the special meeting to consider the Warwickshire Library and Information Service. He noted that the report posted out to Members contained revisions in respect of Lillington and Stockingford Libraries (Appendix 6).

(1) Apologies for absence

None.

(2) Members Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

David Carter advised Members that they should declare a personal interest if they were sponsoring a bid to become a community library, but not merely as local Members to libraries considered in the report.

Councillor Michael Doody declared a personal interest as a member of Warwick District Council.

Councillor Barry Lobbett declared a personal interest in relation to his association with the formulation of a Business Case for a community library in Bedworth Heath.

Councillor John Ross declared a personal interest in relation to his association with the formulation of a Business Case for a community library in Bulkington.

Councillor Ray Sweet declared a personal interest in relation to his association with the formulation of a Business Case for community libraries in both Baddesley and Dordon.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair noted that while there was no item on the agenda specifically for public questions, he would use his discretion in allowing public questions, if appropriate.

The Chair reminded Members about the work programme workshop immediately following the meeting.

Councillor Richard Chattaway recorded his concern about the process in the run-up to the meeting. He added that no opposition members had been consulted on the report and asked the Monitoring Officer to investigate.

2. Changing Time – a new chapter for Warwickshire Library and Information Service

Councillor Colin Hayfield introduced the item, which would be considered by the Cabinet on 14 July, detailing the result of the 12-week consultation on proposals for the future direction of the Warwickshire Library and Information Service to achieve the £2m budget reduction agreed by Cabinet on 17 March 2011.

During the ensuing discussion the following points were considered:

1. The dedication of the library staff was commended and concern was raised about the timing of possible redundancies before the consultation exercise was complete. Kushal Birla added that the library staff were about to be consulted on their preferred

options for the future, covering options including reduced hours and voluntary redundancy, in order to avoid compulsory redundancies. It would be made clear that this did not constitute an offer.

2. Evidence supported expectations that not all community libraries would succeed. Councillor Hayfield stated that it was important communities were given the opportunity but if a community library failed, there would be no financial latitude and they would have to close. Future reviews of the mobile library service would have to take these events into account, although the current fleet was being reduced.
3. Volunteering was not new to libraries, and the current mobile library service relied on volunteers. It was acknowledged that this needed to be handled sensitively because of the implications for current staff, particularly in terms of the offer of initial training for volunteers.
4. It was suggested that the final decision on library closures and changes to services should be considered by full Council.
5. Officers had been asked to contact all elected Members in areas where libraries were identified for closure to ensure that local Members had the opportunity to influence events.
6. Parallels were drawn with the recent changes to the Youth Service, where the Cabinet had received an assessment of each Business Case, which Members felt had been useful.
7. Community groups were responsible for formalising their Business Plans, with advice from library staff. Community Libraries would still be able to access the Library Management System and the Library Service would continue to replenish/change the books for community libraries. Concern was expressed at the level of the book fund and Councillor Hayfield noted that he and the service were looking into different solutions to this.
8. There needed to be some focus on libraries threatened with changes to services, particularly reduced hours.
9. Members noted their concern about incorrect information included in the report. Councillor Hayfield asked that Members notify the library team of any details that were incorrect.
10. Interest had been expressed by all 16 communities, ranging from letters of intent to full business cases. Following a request from the Chair that the businesses cases received be shared with the Chair and Party Spokespersons, David Carter agreed to consider this request and to respond to the Chair. Kushal Birla added that it was always going to be tough for communities to put forward business cases for sustainable community libraries, when these libraries had not been sustainable for the County Council.
11. Concern was expressed that while there was broad agreement that a review of the library service was needed, this was now being driven by financial pressures. It was suggested that the changes should have been spread out over a number of years.

Councillor Hayfield responded by saying that the decision had been made at the budget setting in February 2011, to frontload savings to avoid having to pay more in the future.

12. Members agreed that the consultation process had been robust but there was some concern raised about the lack of publicity for the consultation events.
13. Kushal Birla reported that discussions with Warwick District Council had been deferred by Warwick District Council until after the Cabinet decision, to ensure integrated working. Councillor Michael Doody stated that this item was expected to be considered at Warwick District Council during the week beginning 18 July.
14. David Carter referred to Section 9 of the report covering the legal implications for Warwickshire County Council. He noted that the Judicial Review that would take place in Gloucestershire was expected to consider the process of the decisions made, and added that while similar changes had been made by Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire County Councils, Warwickshire's process had been very different to both.
15. In response to a query regarding school libraries, Kushal Birla stated that all schools and businesses had been contacted at the beginning of the consultation exercise to invite involvement, but few schools had shown any interest, largely due to security issues.
16. There was some discussion regarding the 2 mil/5 km radii used to formulate the catchment areas, and the discrepancies that existed between rural, isolated communities (Alcester, Coleshill and Shipston) and more urban areas, particularly in terms of the double counting of users across urban areas and public transport and accessibility in rural areas.
17. It was acknowledged that the majority of the closures would take place in the north of the county, due largely to small libraries in the north, with lower footfall.
18. It was agreed that Cabinet would need to give a clear steer in terms of capital funding and where they would consider agreeing capital grants above the £100,000 already agreed. This needed to be clarified in light of the Property Rationalisation exercise that was taking place alongside this review, which was seeking approximately £1.4m in capital receipts. The Chair emphasised that the Cabinet would need to be clear about what was meant by "appropriate rentals" and what timescales would be attached to these. Councillor Hayfield confirmed that he would be asking officers to prepare a report for Cabinet in October to set out the implications for the Council of adding capital or offering one-off funding to help communities to launch community libraries.

The Chair invited Robin Aird, member of the Dunchurch Parish Council, to put forward a question. Mr Aird asked the following question:

“It had been inferred delays in presenting Business Cases had been due to a lack of expertise in local communities. He rejected this, stating that, certainly in the case of Dunchurch, there was a huge amount of experience and any delays had been caused by the County Council not being clear about the information required. Dunchurch Parish Council had requested access to extended hours for the library on 4 May 2011, and this had taken two months to be approved. The Dunchurch Business Case had been submitted on 17 June and was as robust as was considered possible with the information available to the Parish Council. It was felt the Business Case had not been given due consideration and there was additional information available that had not been included in the report to the Communities O&S. I also am concerned about the discussions in relation to capital, as the Business Case would be jeopardized without prolonged security of tenure.”

Councillor Colin Hayfield replied that not all communities had experience in developing business cases. He added that he was not in a position to change the County Council policy on peppercorn rent, which was currently set on a five year basis with a review after one year. Councillor Hayfield supported the suggestion that the Communities O&S Committee consider the Business Cases in advance of the October Cabinet.

The Chair thanked Members and officers for their contributions and hoped that the Cabinet would take on board the comments of the Committee.

Councillor Richard Chattaway moved (and was seconded by Councillor Ray Sweet) that in response to the issues raised by the Committee, that the Cabinet delay any decision making and extend the deadline for Business Cases until the end of October, with a full report setting out recommendations to the Cabinet in November. A vote was taken and there were three in favour and six against.

Councillor Helen Walton moved (and was seconded by Councillor Michael Doody), and it was unanimously **resolved** that the Cabinet, having agreed an extension of four weeks to the deadline for Business Cases, agree that an interim report with outcomes be brought to a special meeting of the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration, as soon as possible and prior to the report being considered by the Cabinet.

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Chair

The Committee rose at 12:00 pm