

**Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee
held at Shire Hall, Warwick on 10 October 2011**

Present:

Members of the Committee

Councillor Sarah Boad
Councillor Richard Chattaway
Councillor Michael Doody
Councillor Carol Fox
Councillor Jim Foster
Councillor Barry Lobbett
Councillor Tilly May
Councillor Ray Sweet
Councillor Helen Walton
Councillor John Whitehouse (Chair)
Councillor Chris Williams

Other County Councillors

Councillor Peter Butlin
Councillor Colin Hayfield
Councillor Richard Hobbs
Councillor David Johnston

Officers

David Abbott, Democratic Services Officer
Kushal Birla, Head of Customer Service
David Carter, Strategic Director, Resources Group
Monica Fogarty, Strategic Director, Communities Group
Chris Juckes, Head of Projects
Ayub Khan, Head of Libraries Strategy
Gary Phillips, Deputy Chief Fire Officer

There were no members of the public in attendance.

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Mike Gittus and Chris Saint, who were substituted by Councillors Carol Fox and Chris Williams respectively.

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Alan Cockburn who was represented by Councillor Helen Walton.

(2) Members' Disclosures of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

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

Councillor Chris Williams declared a personal interest as a member of Stratford District Council.

Councillor Ray Sweet declared a personal interest because of his work on community library bids.

(3) Chair's Announcements

None.

(4) Minutes of the meeting held on 31 August 2011

The minutes were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting and were signed by the Chair.

Matters Arising:

3.3 The Rowan Centre, Atherstone

The Portfolio Holder agreed to bring a written answer back to the Committee.

3.4 Sprinkler Systems in WCC Buildings

The Portfolio Holder explained that WCC is looking to install sprinkler systems in buildings such as care homes and certain schools where there is significant risk. The majority of WCC owned properties do not have a high level of risk.

3.5 Fire Station Closures and Response Times

Gary Phillips told the Committee that the response times have been mapped out using the Fire Service Emergency Cover toolkit (FSEC), which is used to help with the allocation of response resources and the targeting of prevention activities.

Warwickshire's urban response time standard is 10 minutes and the rural response time standard is 20 minutes. All areas were mapped in preparation for station closures and those maps can be made available to any Councillor who requests them.

Recent fires in Brinklow and Norton Lindsey were responded to in 9 minutes and 14 minutes respectively, which is within the standards set for Warwickshire.

4.8 Integrated Risk Management Plan Consultation

Councillor Richard Hobbs confirmed that the revised Integrated Risk Management Plan will go to full council and will be available electronically for general public consultation at that time.

2. Public Question Time

None.

3. Questions to the Portfolio Holder

Councillor Richard Chattaway asked Councillor Richard Hobbs if retained fire-fighters are trained to the same level as full-time fire-fighters.

Councillor Richard Hobbs responded that they are currently trained to the same level as full-time staff but going forward there will be some specialist

duties that retained fire-fighters will not be trained in to the same level and will only be done with supervision from full-time fire-fighters.

4. Warwickshire Library and Information Service – Facing the Challenge

Councillor Colin Hayfield presented the paper and the following points were noted:

- Library service staff should be thanked for all of their hard work on the community library bids, even when some of their own jobs were at risk.
- Elected members should be thanked for their work with community groups in their wards to bring bids forward.
- There has been remarkable community involvement.
- Because of the hard work of local communities WCC is in a very different position than many other County Councils.
- Some community libraries will succeed, some will struggle, and some will fail but we will support them as best we can.
- The Council is looking at holding a volunteering fair across the county to encourage volunteerism and make people aware of the wide range of services that can be contributed to.

Councillor Discussion:

Councillor Colin Hayfield

The Big Society fund is £125,000 - there is not enough money available for all of the bids.

Officers are looking to see if there is any way to increase the size of the funding pot.

Councillor David Johnston

Community youth services are trying to access the Big Society funding as well but they are working to longer timescales.

Is it fair to make funding decisions on Libraries before the needs of other community projects are known?

Councillor Colin Hayfield

- At this stage only the proposals for funding are being agreed.
- There will be an officer panel evaluating the funding bids.
- The officer's panel has made recommendations but it was unlikely they will be ready for the next meeting of Cabinet.
- The final decision on funding will be a Portfolio Holder's decision.

Councillor Sarah Boad

- The Portfolio Holder is trying to keep libraries open but is also responsible for portioning out the Big Society fund to a wide range of different organisations. Is this not a conflict of interest?
- There is no precedent for this to be a Portfolio Holder's decision alone.
- This is a huge amount of money and yet there will be little oversight of the decision.

Councillor Colin Hayfield

The Portfolio Holders decision is subject to call-in from councillors.

Councillor Richard Chattaway

How can Cabinet make a decision on which bids to support when the outcomes of the Big Society funding recommendations are still unknown?

Councillor Colin Hayfield

- WCC has a choice – we either take a chance on community run libraries or simply close them.
- Some community run libraries will flourish, some will struggle, and some will close. We would rather give them a chance than not.
- Differences across the county have become manifest during this process. There is an established culture of volunteering in some of the more affluent areas where perhaps there isn't in more deprived areas. We have decided to give more latitude in areas of deprivation to ensure some balance.

Councillor Ray Sweet

Most of the business cases are reliant on various grant funding sources – I am concerned that the libraries will run for a year then fail. It would be a devastating loss for the community after all of this hard work.

Councillor Colin Hayfield

There is support available – the book supply, training, and insurance. We have pushed as far as is possible for the package of help available to community libraries.

Councillor Michael Doody

We want to keep as many libraries open as possible. The problem with this report is timing – it is coming before other major decisions are made. In a month's time we would have a clearer view.

Councillor John Whitehouse

Paragraph 4.5.8 of the report is wrong - the majority of grant applications won't be known by the time Cabinet meet.

Councillor Colin Hayfield

A number of community groups are looking to see if Cabinet supported their proposals or not. They know that their bids are predicated on funding being allocated to them.

Councillor Jim Foster

I represent an area where we have no centres of these types and not a single person is coming to me about this issue. Giving the centres back to the community is a good thing.

Councillor Carol Fox

The message should be clearer in the report for members of the public. It should be clear that Cabinet are supporting these groups on the condition that they get the money.

Kushal Birla

- We have been working with communities for almost a year.
- Community groups are very aware that they have to open sustainable libraries by April 2012 or WCC will have to look at alternative options.

- There has been a desperate plea from communities to keep a community hub open – somewhere people feel safe.
- They have found completing the business cases difficult. It has taken a lot of officer time to work with them.
- The library service doesn't have the capacity to hand hold beyond the support already given.

Councillor Whitehouse

There is unhappiness in the room due to the fact that the vast majority of funding is coming from WCC and not external sources but we don't have that information.

This is in the hands of WCC – you have had a timetable in place but haven't managed to bring both the funding information and the bid recommendations together.

Councillor Colin Hayfield

- The budget is fixed – the major decisions relating to libraries were taken in July.
- The opportunities that are now developing with community involvement are the silver lining.
- The library service needed to change and the timing is never going to perfect.
- Community groups are waiting to hear Cabinet's decision.
- If you have any suggestions we want to hear them.

Councillor Whitehouse

We have heard that the Big Society fund is heavily oversubscribed - how realistic an option is increasing that funding pot?

Big Society funding is a crucial element of many of the bids.

How much extra guidance will you be able to give Cabinet on Thursday about the allocation of that funding?

Councillor Colin Hayfield

I will ask officers to look into it.

David Carter advised the Committee that if there was an increase to the Big Society fund then it would be one-off funding only.

Councillor Tilly May asked if there was any value assigned to the level of input from volunteers.

Chris Jukes responded that the number and quality of volunteers was assessed but there was no monetary value assigned because it wouldn't help deliver the savings target.

The Chair proposed that the Committee look at the bids on a case by case basis. The following bids were commented on:

Baddesley Ensor

Councillor Ray Sweet asked what would happen to the library site at Baddesley Endsor.

Councillor Colin Hayfield informed the Committee that all vacant library sites will be disposed of in the same way as any other surplus Council property – according to Warwickshire County Council's property rationalisation plan.
Bedworth Heath

Councillor Sarah Boad supported the proposal but pointed out that this proposal is similar to the Brunswick Library in Leamington Spa which failed because there was no active input or stock turn-over.

Kushal Birla explained that they are going to be a part of the book circulation initially but added that the library service needed to be firm on terms and conditions because of the potential for theft / misuse.

Councillor John Whitehouse asked if book replenishment would be the County Council's decision.

Kushal Birla responded that discussions still need to take place with the community to see how the policy will be policed.

4.7.14 Kingsbury School

Councillor Hayfield

- Kingsbury was essentially asking for a new school library that the public to have access to.
- It would be unfair for the library service to take on the cost.
- We hope that negotiations re-open with the education service.
- If Kingsbury closes then a sizable community would be deprived of a library.

Kushal Birla explained that not only was the bid asking for £100,000 in capital funding but it also wouldn't have been open by April next year.

4.8 Options for Alternative Arrangements

Sarah Boad

- Community groups are being charged to use the libraries outside of their core opening hours. The cost is a disincentive.
- If the church groups want to keep a library open for one afternoon a week should they be charged?

Kushal Birla

- There are very few spaces that can be used for free.
- This can be evaluated on a case by case basis but we do currently hire out library rooms.
- These charges can be used to cover utilities bills for example.
- We don't want to say we won't charge for space.
- The library service does have income targets.

Councillor Hayfield

- There is a difference between people opening a library and a specific group of people getting a room for their activity for free.
- If a group are coming together to keep a library open then personally I don't think they should pay for that.
- If it is for another purpose then they should.

- I will clarify this issue with officers.

Councillor Richard Chattaway asked what the legal liabilities would be for community groups that run a library.

David Carter explained that because these groups were asking for a peppercorn rent they will be entirely responsible for insurance, the maintenance of the buildings, health and safety etc. WCC will make sure community groups have insurance in place before the final contracts are signed.

Councillor Richard Chattaway, referring to paragraph 4.9 of the report, asked how the property rationalisation savings plan would be balanced in light of the loss of a potential capital receipt of £784,000.

David Carter explained that due to a number of decisions WCC there will be a review of the impact on the capital receipt target on the budget.

5 Opening Hours

Councillor John Whitehouse asked for assurances that no unilateral decision would be made by WCC on hours reductions before talks are complete.

Kushal Birla said she hoped discussions would conclude in the next fortnight but noted that they are reliant on partners working together.

Councillor Richard Chattaway asked what public consultation will take place regarding the cutting of core library opening hours.

Kushal Birla explained that the library service has looked at usage and community feedback. In the next few weeks there will be a consultation with two different options.

Councillor Sarah Boad

- There isn't enough time to plan and evaluate the way in which extended hours is working.
- When will we know what the plan is for each library?
- We should be able to build cases on top of a solid foundation.

Kushal Birla

The fallback position is what Cabinet decided in July – to close all sixteen libraries. Where there are no proposals that will be the consultation. In other cases we will consult on the community proposals.

Councillor John Whitehouse asked if the consultation would be on a library by library basis or if all libraries would be considered at the same time.

Kushal Birla responded that the library service is only proposing to go to consultation once.

Councillor Chris Williams highlighted the contradiction between points 5.5 and 5.6 of the report and asked what the police were actually supporting.

Kushal Birla explained that the police have been delighted with the delivery of contact services in Southam and Shipston. Coleshill have seen a large number of enquires and therefore the police are not happy about the proposed reduction in opening hours.

Councillor Tilly May informed the Committee that the police pay an amount per enquiry therefore the longer they are open, in theory, the more income they would receive.

5.8 Volunteering

Councillor John Whitehouse

- The report states that there was a disappointing response to a request in the libraries consultation but the experts in volunteering (CAVA etc.) weren't engaged.
- Can we have assurances that volunteering will be considered on a more thorough basis in the future?

Councillor Sarah Boad asked if the library service was working with existing volunteer groups (Church groups for example). Volunteer run services are vulnerable if individuals fail to show up but established volunteering groups would have support in place.

Councillor Colin Hayfield

- If any other cost neutral solutions are put forward they would be considered.
- There could be more volunteers available to deliver other WCC services.
- It is a step the whole County Council needs to take to involve them in a whole range of services.

7 Mobile Library Service

Kushal Birla explained that the energies of officers are taken up with setting up community libraries at the moment but advised that the Committee could look in more detail at the reconfiguration of the Mobile Library Service in September 2012.

Councillors agreed, as discussed in previous meetings, that money should be put back into the stock fund as it is the core of the service.

Councillor Michael Doody asked what discussions were taking place with District Councils.

Kushal Birla explained that discussions were ongoing with all District Councils. North Warwickshire was keen to use WCC premises. Nuneaton & Bedworth have already co-located the customer service centre and are looking to use our premises for other services.

Councillors agreed that the Committee should receive update reports on the status of the Library Service Transformation.

The Portfolio Holder agreed to bring reports back to every meeting, or as necessary, and noted that all community proposals were subject to review in 12 months from the date they open.

Councillor Richard Chattaway, seconded by Councillor Ray Sweet, moved and it was resolved as set out below:

Resolved

1. That the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee note concern at the reduction to the Warwickshire Library and Information Service.
2. That because vital information about the allocation of Big Society funding has not been made available to the Committee, it is impossible to make informed considerations concerning the viability of each individual community bid.

The Chair asked officers to clarify the outcome of the bidding process for the Big Society fund and if there was any extra money available to the fund on a one-off basis before Cabinet so they can make a more informed decision.

5. Work Programme

The Chair noted that there is space in the schedule going forward and if any members have suggestions for scrutiny they can feed them to their spokesperson.

Resolved

That the Committee endorse the draft work programme for 2011-12, with the following addition:

- Regular update reports on the status of the Library Transformation Programme.

6. Any Other Items

There were no urgent items.

The Committee rose at 12.15pm

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Chair