

SAFER & STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Monday, 12 December 2011 commencing at 9.00 am and finishing at 12.05 pm

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Lawrie Stratford – in the Chair

Councillor Stewart Lilly (Deputy Chairman)

Councillor John Goddard

Councillor Alyas Ahmed

Councillor Susanna Pressel

Councillor John Sanders

Councillor Bill Service

Councillor Alan Thompson

Councillor A.M. Lovatt (In place of Councillor Anthony Gearing)

Councillor Steve Hayward (In place of Councillor Carol Viney)

Other Members in Attendance:

Councillor Judith Heathcoat

Officers:

Whole of meeting

John Jackson (Director for Social & Community Services)

Karen Warren (Acting County Librarian)

Alexandra Bailey (Corporate Performance and Review Manager)

Sue Whitehead (Committee Services Manager)

Kathrin Luddecke (Scrutiny Officer)

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting, together with an additional document listing speakers from the public tabled at the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports and additional document are attached to the signed Minutes.

167/11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Anthony Gearing (Councillor Sandy Lovatt as substitute) and Councillor Carol Viney (Councillor Steve Hayward as substitute).

168/11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE

(Agenda No. 2)

Cllr Heathcoat noted that as Cabinet Member whose portfolio includes library services she had not participated in discussions on Faringdon library.

John Jackson also expressed a personal interest in Faringdon library as a user of that library.

169/11 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 3)

The Chairman reminded the committee that the minutes of the last meeting would be considered at its next regular meeting in February, as agreed.

170/11 SPEAKING TO OR PETITIONING THE COMMITTEE

(Agenda No. 4)

The following speakers addressed the committee, as agreed by the chairman:

- Dr Judith Wardle (Save Oxfordshire Libraries)
- Trevor Craig
- Julia Drown (Old Marston)
- Paddy Landau (Save Kennington Library)
- Philip Pinney (Friends of Watlington Library)
- Christopher Quinton (Woodcote)

Local Members:

- Cllr Neil Owen (Charlbury)
- Cllr Ian Hudspeth (Woodstock)

Dr Lawrence Reavill (Goring Parish Council) has asked to speak but was unable to be present. Ian Hill (Watlington Parish Council) had asked to speak but then agreed that Mr Pinney would also speak on his behalf.

Key issues referred to in the discussion included:

Dependence on volunteers

- Fear there could be a lack of volunteers to be found
- Volunteers' skills, need for extensive training
- Lone working concerns
- Friends of libraries groups already stretched
- Core libraries not being asked to use volunteers for core services

Consultation

- Criteria based on need, current usage not taken into account
- Rural bias in the methodology used to assess the requirements of the library service
- Smaller libraries affected disproportionately

SSC3

- Cuts should be evenly distributed across all libraries
- Not sufficient account taken of proposed housing growth

Costs and funding

- Benchmarking of service costs against other authorities
- Savings difficult to deliver

Dr Wardle noted that Save Oxfordshire Libraries was not a political group. They were concerned that the quantitative analysis had favoured urban libraries. 16 friends of libraries groups had said that the proposals would not work and four groups that they could cover 1/3 of hours with volunteers; more would not be sustainable.

Mr Craig contended that the figures did not stack up with a shortfall in proposed savings. He questioned the proportion of funding going to back office functions, making comparisons with other authorities, and suggesting that savings could be achieved by looking further at management and professional support services rather than recruiting volunteers.

Ms Drown was concerned about difficulties of relying on volunteers with a varied range of skills, the need to train them and concerns about how the council would fulfil its duty of care towards volunteers. In her view the proposals were impractical and projected savings exaggerated.

Mr Landau noted that while the Friends of Kennington Library were in strong position, already raising funds for a library with low overheads in shared premises; they would struggle with a 50% cut as existing volunteers were already stretched. He asked that a “one size fits all” approach to implementing the proposals should be avoided.

Mr Pinney explained that Friends of Watlington Library had been set up 12 years ago to save it from closure. It had raised funds to have the building restored, extended and self-service introduced from October last year. He referred to the strength of local feeling and concerns about proposed reductions in staff.

Speaking on behalf of Mr Hill, Mr Pinney welcomed changes from previous proposals but expressed concerns about the impact of savings on rural communities. He thought the parameters used were biased against rural areas and proposals did not address the spread of rural populations or the role of larger rural settlements as hubs.

Mr Quinton expressed concerns about the potential impact of the proposed changes on the agreement with Langtree school where Woodcote Library is based. He also questioned how much working with volunteers would cost, suggesting there could be no or insignificant savings from the proposals.

Councillor Owen welcomed the modifications to proposals but was also concerned about the impact on rural communities and about contingency plans if insufficient numbers of volunteers came forward.

Councillor Hudspeth also expressed concerns about the methodology, in particular in defining the catchment area for libraries and its impact on rural communities like Woodstock, and pointed out the infrequency of public transport to places other than

central Oxford. He felt that developing a 21st century library service required a “can do” approach, such as looking more closely into working with others such as the universities.

171/11 PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE LIBRARY SERVICE

(Agenda No. 5)

The committee discussed the changes proposed to Cabinet for the Library Service at some length. The Director for Social & Community Services, John Jackson, gave a comprehensive presentation on the Cabinet report. He explained how proposals had changed, taking into account:

- Public reaction to initial proposals a year ago and responses to the consultation over the summer
- Additional resources available as reflected in February’s council budget
- Library service legislation now tested in court

The council had now defined that its ‘comprehensive and efficient network’ of library provision was made up of 22 core libraries. No alternative definition had been put forward, except the suggestion to base it on usage figures rather than need.

John Jackson noted that the Wirral case suggested a comprehensive and efficient network should be based on need not current usage; a wide range of factors influenced usage figures of any given library. The case also showed that clear robust criteria should apply across all libraries without exception. In terms of the concerns expressed about the council’s data analysis, he referred to the full response made available on the website and included as Annex 6 of the Cabinet report.

He offered a detailed overview of the costs of the library service, concluding that genuine back office functions made up less than 10% of the overall cost of the service - a comparable figure to other authorities.

In response to suggestions that reductions should be shared across the whole service, officers had advised that the core network should be resourced properly. The introduction of self-service had also brought savings in these 22 libraries.

However, the council wished to see the other 21 libraries remain open as valued community assets. It proposed to continue funding these, 81% of the costs of community and community plus libraries, and ensure they had full access to the library system. The proposals included an increase in the proportion of paid staff to volunteers, at an additional cost of £67,000. It was noted that it was up to town and parish councils to decide if they wanted to provide additional funding through their precept.

Karen Warren gave further details on how the council was, and proposes to, train and support library volunteers. She noted that there already were 140 active volunteers and 24 in process of being trained. Training would be mostly in-house and where this was not possible, e.g. with First Aid and Fire, it would be held as locally as possible. Support could be tailored for individual libraries and guidance would be light-touch. There would be clear support and a communication tree for any cases of lone working, where this could not be avoided. Officers were confident that volunteering in

a library would be an attractive option and the service would be able to attract and retain sufficient volunteers. 461 potential volunteers had come forward in the consultation.

During the subsequent debate, members raised further questions and sought clarity and reassurance in a number of areas. These included support for volunteers, cost of CRB checks, qualifications and pay of library staff, rural need, the mobile library service, the ability to work with individual libraries (including those located in schools) to tailor proposals and future housing growth.

In conclusion, members thanked the Cabinet Member and all the officers for their work throughout the consultation, attending numerous public meetings and responding to a large number of communications. Members were also appreciative that local concerns had been listened to and that current proposals were positive:

- All libraries are to remain open
- Roll out of self-service will be easier to use for volunteers
- Increased proportion of staff in community and community plus libraries than previously proposed
- Implementation over a period of time, giving greater opportunity to develop solutions appropriate to each library
- Quantitative data to be reviewed on a four year basis or sooner if circumstances dictate (as noted in the recommendations to Cabinet)

Points that came out of the committee's discussion to be taken forward included:

- Officers to ensure that suggestions for potential further savings, including those made by friends groups, through sharing resources with neighbouring authorities or further collocation are explored
- Officers to ensure that when proposals are implemented they are fine-tuned to local circumstances with communities concerned
- Scrutiny to ensure the Library Service continues to remain on its forward plan as proposals are implemented
- Officers to look into potential opportunities to bid for one-off funding where appropriate

In summary, most members were satisfied that concerns raised had been answered fully by the officers present. Councillor Lilly proposed and on a vote by a show of hands, the majority supported the recommendations being put to Cabinet in the afternoon by eight votes to two.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing