

Item 13. Library Services in Cambridgeshire: Developing our Approach for the Future

1. The Cambridgeshire community has a strong commitment to libraries. That much is clear from the level of concern generated by the recent 'Enterprise Centre' debacle. As a Cambridgeshire County Councillor, I received more e-mails, phone calls, and other communications on this matter than on any other since being elected in May 2013. Residents spoke with me in the street, on the doorstep and on buses. Bus travellers missed their stop in order to emphasise their concerns and raise points of importance. Cyclists halted on their bicycles to raise the matter. Cars stopped. Phones rang – often all this happening at once, and whilst I was accessing e-mails or text messages on the subject.
2. Clearly, the savage funding cuts (not 'efficiency savings') imposed from central government mean the County Council must look to ways of providing current services at the necessary level by deploying resources in ways that enable this to happen. The County Council also needs to look to ways of generating income.
3. However, it is difficult to discern from the paper presented to the Health & Wellbeing Board precisely what is being suggested for library services. No clear proposals are put forward. No clear strategy for implementing any proposals is stated. Anyone agreeing to this paper is agreeing to 'anything' that might in the future be put forward with a claim that it has been supported by the Health & Wellbeing Board. Councillors need to be both aware and wary of this.
4. The paper does refer to a 'new Enterprise Centre at Central Library'. There is no indication of what this means – the flawed proposal originally endorsed by a slim majority of the Highways & Community Infrastructure Committee has been recognised since by all members of that Committee as misguided. It is clear that there is no need for private sector invasion of libraries for libraries to continue providing services and generating income. Central Cambridge Library already generates some £38,000 annually through hire of meeting rooms and all indications are that this sum can be readily increased without detracting from existing services. Wit, energy and commitment are most decidedly present in the library sector including the Central Library – all this needs to be valued and valorised, so that it can operate to maximise revenue raising opportunities on top of the already solid work undertaken by staff in all Cambridgeshire libraries.
5. If the private sector is to be involved, the Council needs to ensure that processes are transparent, private sector parties are properly subjected to due diligence, no confidentiality agreements are to be signed by anyone involved without proper oversight by the relevant Committee and, in any event, always with a Chair and Deputy Chair of the relevant Committee to be the signatories – so as to take responsibility and to report back to the fellow Councillors on that Committee. Furthermore, the Council needs to be aware that interminable meetings between Council officers and private sector parties projecting themselves as capable of running profitable enterprises within public sector institutions are an indicator that the private sector parties are surely not capable of undertaking any enterprise. A business person intent on promoting a private sector enterprise and actually making it work is unlikely to linger in interminable meetings: doing so would seem to indicate a propensity for 'talk-festing' rather than seriousness as to business enterprise. In any event, most importantly, as above, the talent, capacity, capability, expertise and experience of

those in the public sector must be recognised substantively, rather than 'private sector' being wrongly promoted as the 'only' means of sustaining operational capacity.

6. The reason libraries 'bring a highly trusted "brand"' is because of their present services, professional and trained staff, and well-lit, welcoming buildings and atmosphere. Losing any of these attributes would lead to a diminution of trust and debasing of the 'brand'.

7. As to the present position. On the one hand, the understandable anxiety generated by savage funding cuts that appear designed to destroy local government or at least render it operative has led to the notion that the only way out is to involve the private sector, turning the Central Library into a business operation. On the other, the proposal seems to be that libraries as a whole should be reframed as welfare centres. This is all to be done, as it appears, through the employment of 'generic staff'.

8. Yet professional librarians are essential to library provision – and that is why people are attracted to libraries, why libraries do fulfil an important role in education, training, entertainment and positive wellbeing for all in the community, and why libraries are a 'trusted "brand"'. Services for those suffering from high-level health problems such as dementia require professional services directed toward the alleviation or at least addressing the issues in a trained manner. These services need to be provided by professionals with appropriate training. Librarians cannot work as health or welfare workers. Health and welfare workers cannot work as librarians. Skills and professionalism are inherent in these jobs and those skills and professionalism are specific to them. Generic staff cannot fulfil the role of trained, skilled professionals. Trained, skilled professionals are able to work in a multi-tasked manner: this is a part of their training, skill and professionalism. However, to suggest that 'generic staff' can straddle the worlds of libraries and hospitals or care homes might be described by some as fanciful.

9. As proposed at the recent Highways & Community Infrastructure meeting of 26 June, the County Council needs to establish urgently a small working group comprising County Councillors, Library staff (particularly incorporating the expertise of the Central Library Events Team), County officers and members of the community to devise a forward-looking plan and strategy for the future of the libraries of Cambridgeshire so that they can continue to play their present role and build on it so as to (a) serve community needs to the optimal degree possible bearing in mind the function and purpose of libraries and their important role as libraries; and (b) where relevant incorporate income generating programmes including meeting room hire (inside and outside opening hours), performance and speakers, discussion groups and other events – this is already being done and requires support with additional staffing so that these programmes are able to meet their potential and exceed expectations.

10. Any plan or programme generated by this working group must identify clear goals and strategies, with clear, readily understood proposals in plain language, focused and direct so that those reading the plan or programme can understand precisely what is proposed and County Councillors can adopt the plan or programme knowing precisely what it is they are adopting.

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