

COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON

TUESDAY, 7 FEBRUARY 2017

Councillors Present: Steve Ardagh-Walter, Peter Argyle, Howard Bairstow, Pamela Bale, Jeremy Bartlett, Jeff Beck, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgman, Paul Bryant, Anthony Chadley, Keith Chopping, Jeanette Clifford, Hilary Cole, Roger Croft, Richard Crumly, Rob Denton-Powell, Lee Dillon, Lynne Doherty, Billy Drummond, Adrian Edwards, Marcus Franks, James Fredrickson, Manohar Gopal, Paul Hower, Clive Hooker, Carol Jackson-Doerge (Vice-Chairman), Marigold Jaques, Mike Johnston, Graham Jones, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Mollie Lock, Gordon Lundie, Tim Metcalfe, Ian Morrin, Anthony Pick, James Podger, Garth Simpson, Richard Somner, Quentin Webb (Chairman), Emma Webster and Laszlo Zverko

Also Present: John Ashworth (Corporate Director - Environment), Mike Brook (Library Services Manager), Nick Carter (Chief Executive), Sarah Clarke (Acting Head of Legal Services), Martin Dunscombe (Communications Manager), Paul James (Culture Manager), Shiraz Sheikh (Principal Solicitor), Rachael Wardell (Corporate Director - Communities), Steve Broughton (Head of Culture & Environmental Protection), Moira Fraser (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager) and Honorary Alderman Andrew Rowles (Honorary Alderman)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Dennis Benneyworth, Councillor James Cole, Councillor Sheila Ellison, Councillor Dave Goff, Councillor Alan Macro, Councillor Graham Pask, Councillor Anthony Stansfeld and Councillor Virginia von Celsing

Councillor Absent: Councillor Nick Goodes

PART I

67. Declarations of Interest

The Monitoring Officer announced that it was acknowledged that the majority of Members were likely to be a user of their local library and that this constituted a personal interest.

Councillors Billy Drummond, Lee Dillon, Mollie Lock, Lynne Doherty, Jeanette Clifford, Dominic Boeck, Hilary Cole, Rick Jones, Mike Johnston, Steve Ardagh-Walter, Richard Crumly, Rob Denton-Powell, Anthony Pick, Richard Somner, Paul Hower, Jeff Beck, Adrian Edwards, Carol Jackson-Doerge, Roger Croft, James Fredrickson, Howard Bairstow, Gordon Lundie and Pamela Bale declared an interest in Agenda Item 3, but reported that, as their interest was a personal and not an other registrable interest nor a disclosable pecuniary interest, they determined to remain to take part in the debate and vote on the matter.

68. Library Service Review (C3208)

(Councillors Billy Drummond, Lee Dillon, Mollie Lock, Lynne Doherty, Jeanette Clifford, Dominic Boeck, Hilary Cole, Rick Jones, Mike Johnston, Steve Ardagh-Walter, Richard Crumly, Rob Denton-Powell, Anthony Pick, Richard Somner, Paul Hower, Jeff Beck, Adrian Edwards, Carol Jackson-Doerge, Roger Croft, James Fredrickson and Howard Bairstow declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 by virtue of the fact that they were dual hatted Members and contributions were being sought from town and parish councils towards funding of libraries. As their interest was personal and not an other registrable nor a disclosable pecuniary interest they determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

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(Councillors Howard Bairstow and Adrian Edwards declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 by virtue of the fact that they were trustees of the Friends of Wash Common Library Group. As their interest was personal and not an other registrable nor a disclosable pecuniary interest they determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter.)

(Councillor Pamela Bale declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 by virtue of the fact that she was a member of the Friends of Pangbourne Library Group. As her interest was personal and not an other registrable nor a disclosable pecuniary interest she determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

(Councillor Gordon Lundie declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 by virtue of the fact that he was a member of the Friends of Lambourn Library Group. As his interest was personal and not an other registrable nor a disclosable pecuniary interest he determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

(Councillor Mollie Lock declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 3 by virtue of the fact that she was a member of Mortimer Parish Council and its Library Working Party. As her interest was personal and not an other registrable nor a disclosable pecuniary interest she determined to take part in the debate and vote on the matter).

The Council considered a report (Agenda Item 3) which had been drafted following a public consultation on the future shape of the Library Service and sought agreement for the best option for the structure of the service.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Dominic Boeck and seconded by Councillor Hilary Cole:

That:

1. "The Council approves the adoption of Option A as the most appropriate structure for the Libraries Service, with the proviso that different arrangements will be necessary in some libraries.
2. Officers examine opportunities to pilot community run services, where communities provided sufficient support, in line with Options B and C in order to achieve the full savings target of £690k, and that this could include consideration of any proposal from the community in Wash Common."

Councillor Boeck commented that in 2015/16 West Berkshire Council had been presented with a significantly reduced Revenue Support Grant. The Council therefore had to consider difficult options in order to ensure that it met its statutory duty to present a balanced budget. At the time it was proposed that, with the exception of Newbury, all the libraries would be closed.

It soon became very evident that there was a strong appetite locally to retain libraries. The District's three MPs, Richard Benyon, Alok Sharma and John Redwood, had lobbied Central Government on behalf of West Berkshire Council and had secured additional transitional funding for the authority. This had given the Council the opportunity to re-assess its savings proposals and it was agreed that a needs assessment around the library service would be commissioned.

RedQuadrant was commissioned to undertake the assessment to inform changes to the shape and structure of the service while ensuring that the Council adhered to its statutory obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. They found that there was a need to retain all branch libraries except Wash Common and to retain a mobile library service. Responses to the consultation indicated greatest support for Option A. Under this option, seven of the branch libraries would reduce staffing levels and

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assistance would be sought from community volunteers thereby generating significant savings.

Town and Parish Councils were being asked to contribute financially to support the library service. The level of contribution sought, £150k, equated to £1 per head of resident population for each of the 63 councils. Many of the parish and town councils had already indicated that they were willing to support their libraries. A number of volunteers had already come forward, this was especially true in Hungerford and Lambourn, and Thatcham Town Council were holding an event to recruit volunteers.

It was recognised that despite declining usage, libraries were a highly valued resource in the community which the Council would seek to preserve. Councillor Boeck therefore urged Members to support the recommendations set out in the report.

Councillor Tony Linden stated that unfortunately the Council was having to make difficult decisions due to the current financial situation. He was pleased to note that the mobile library service was being retained as this was an important asset for the residents of his ward.

Councillor Adrian Edwards commented that when he arrived in the area in 1977 there was a library in Wash Common. A library had existed there in some shape or form ever since. It was a well used facility and when the news broke about the proposed closure the community was very disappointed and they still were. Two public meetings had taken place and over 50 volunteers had been recruited to run the library. There were some issues that still needed to be resolved including the Council responding to a request to retain the building on a pepper corn rent. Funding for the library would be sought through grants and donations, a constitution had been drafted and work on setting up the Friends of Wash Common Library Charity was ongoing. The charity had not yet been registered as £5k was needed in order to do so. The Management Committee would be meeting the following Monday to decide how the funds would be raised and also to agree how the library would run. Councillor Edwards noted that support and training from the Library Service would be needed.

Councillor Lee Dillon noted that the consultation had identified Option A as the least unacceptable option of the three. He noted that even if his group were minded to support Option A, it was still not clear what the Library Service would look like as town and parish council contributions still needed to be tallied and operational models and opening hours were yet to be confirmed. This was despite the fact that the future of the Library Service had first been raised nearly a year before when it had been proposed that all but Newbury Library would be closed.

Councillor Dillon commented that he was pleased to see that a more proactive approach had been adopted by the Council and that it had reached out to the community groups and parish councils. He queried what contingency there was in place if the numbers of volunteers required did not materialise. He also asked what would happen if the parish and town councils could not afford to keep up their contributions. He also was concerned that parish councils would be punished with shorter opening hours if they did not provide additional funding for their nearest library which was not their responsibility. He noted that the consultation exercise showed the strength of feeling against Option B and Option C and the report also referred to the legal challenge the Council could face if it went for either of those options. He was therefore disappointed that even if they were to support Option A they would not be securing the long term future of the Library Service.

Councillor James Fredrickson was disappointed to note that at a recent Newbury Town Council meeting the Liberal Democrat Group had voted not to fund the contributions towards Newbury Library as the proposal was to retain this library.

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Councillor Gordon Lundie stated that he was delighted to see Option A being recommended for approval. When the initial savings proposals had been put forward it was evident that the potential closure of libraries was a matter of great concern for residents. He felt that this option presented an opportunity for communities to form around libraries and the friends of libraries groups that had been created would form the nucleus of the library service. If this option was not taken up and firmly grasped then it was possible that the Council might have to look at Options B and C.

Councillor Lundie hoped that this paper would serve as a call for action to get residents involved in their libraries and that this support could be grown at a local level. He suggested that it would be useful to have library volunteers as a standing item on Operations Board agendas so that Members were regularly reviewing the situation. It was essential that the Council focussed on the volunteer network as it was a critical aspect of this proposal. He thanked Councillors Hilary Cole and Dominic Boeck who, when faced with this difficult decision, had worked with Officers to arrive at a proposal which would generate the required savings but would still ensure that a library service was retained.

Councillor Pamela Bale also welcomed the recommendation that Option A be approved. She commended the work of Officers who had delivered this favourable outcome whilst being faced with the potential closure of their service. She stated that staff and volunteers would need to be supported through the process.

Councillor Mike Johnston noted that the report had been considered by the Environment Select Committee and that they had concluded that Option A should be recommended for approval. He, like Councillor Lundie, recognised the importance of libraries.

Councillor Cole noted that in March 2016 the Council had been placed under severe financial constraints and under those circumstances it had been proposed that the library service would have to be cut. She refuted that the initial proposals had been ill thought out and the initial proposals were a reflection of the unexpected financial situation the Council found itself in. Following the receipt of transitional funding, Officers had more time to consider possible options and she was delighted to second the recommendation that Members support Option A.

Councillor Cole commented that this proposal was an excellent example of how the Council could work with parish and town councils and community groups to arrive at a solution. She accepted that 'one size would not fit all' and that it would be necessary to determine at a local level how the individual libraries would operate. This model would still allow the Council to achieve significant savings which it was required to make. She thanked the town and parish councils and the community groups for their positive approach to finding a solution. She also thanked Officers for the diligent work they had undertaken and recognised that these had been difficult times for them too.

Councillor Boeck refuted the assertion from Councillor Dillon that the Council had been less than diligent in its decision making. He acknowledged that it had taken a year to arrive at a decision but as this was such an important service to residents it was important to preserve it as best as the Council could. He too noted that it was clear that one operating model could not be applied to all libraries and that each would have to be determined at a local level. He noted that a series of meetings with parish and town councils had taken place and he reiterated his thanks for their support. He urged all Members to support the recommendation.

The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

(The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and closed at 7.29 pm)

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CHAIRMAN

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Date of Signature

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