

Extract

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE HELD ON 30 MARCH 2017 FROM 7.30 PM TO 8.25 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Keith Baker (Chairman), Julian McGhee-Sumner, Pauline Jorgensen, Anthony Pollock, Malcolm Richards and Angus Ross

Other Councillors Present

Chris Bowring

Prue Bray

Richard Dolinski

Clive Jones

Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey

129. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

129.3 Peter Must asked the Executive Member for Resident Services the following question:

Question

Since the proposed relocation of Wokingham Library, probably the major public community facility in the town, is posited on an improved service for residents, is it not vital to consult local people to discover their views on the proposal, a measure that could be achieved by for example amending the Recommendation to read: 1) that a public consultation be held about the proposal to relocate Wokingham Library to a new building on the Carnival Phase II site: 2) that any proposal to relocate the Library be then submitted to the Executive by the Executive Member for Resident Services, with a summary of the responses to the consultation, together with a full impact assessment and detailed business case?

Answer

Firstly, I would like to preface this answer by saying that I would not support this proposal if I did not think it provided a real opportunity to further enhance our library offer and I hope that by the end of the process that we are going to go through, that residents will be as excited as I am about the opportunities that the relocation could provide.

The Council conducted its extensive consultation in 2016 about the proposed Library Offer for the Borough; I have got a copy of it here if you would like to see it, including the guiding principles of the service and the way it would be delivered. These views were the cornerstone of the new Library Offer that was adopted by the Council in 2016.

The proposed relocation of Wokingham Library to the Carnival Phase 2 site will not result in a reduction of service or fundamental change to the core services that are available to residents. From the consultation held last year, it was clear that residents wanted the library to retain books as a primary stock type, to offer facilities that support learning and achievement, and to continue to meet residents' expectations for utilising and embracing new technology.

The consultation also showed that there was overwhelming support for our libraries to be able to adapt to the changing needs of our residents and to offer access to other Council services and to broaden the range of activities and events that people can enjoy. Furthermore, there was strong support for collocating library services alongside other services, including sports facilities.

Over a thousand people responded to the consultation on the library offer and only 25% of them did not agree with collocation. Our residents have already provided the Council with a strong statement about their preferences and aspirations. The proposed new site for Wokingham Library will offer more usable space and greater flexibility being located on one floor, which means you only have one entrance and you have vastly improved parking facilities, being adjacent to a destination leisure facility. We think that will also attract people of all ages. Being able to offer all of these improvements on a site that is less than 300m away and clearly visible from the entrance of the current library is an extremely positive opportunity for the Council.

However, we still want to hear people's views as the proposals take shape. The actual library itself will not start build until 2021, so there is plenty of opportunity for people to give us their views now and through the period up to 2021. I would be really, really interested to hear particularly what the users of the library think about this, also particularly about what residents of Wokingham think. Hopefully we will be able to start communicating through the process following the agreement of this in principle to actually help explain to people what facilities will be there and the what the benefits are, and also listen to their feedback as to what they would like.

Supplementary Question

Might I confess to some confusion as to whether that is consultation or just telling people what you are proposing to do? You say you hope everyone will be enthusiastic about it, well why do you not ask them and find out before you start rather than at the end of it?

Supplementary Answer

The reason we are going for consultation now is because it is required as part of the planning process. That does not mean that we actually have to do the change, so what we are doing is putting the approval in principle to make the change in now as part of the kick off of the planning process which is part of the consolidation work around Wokingham town centre.

However, I am very interested to hear what people think. We will be actually asking. It is not a formal consultation because a formal consultation is not required if the services are actually being improved rather than reduced, but nevertheless to all intents and purposes it will be a consultation to listen to what people want and to try change the plans according to what people think.

Councillor Baker added that he as Leader would not add support to any proposal that reduced the quality of the current library services.

129.4 Keith Malvern asked the Executive Member for Resident Services the following question:

Question

Agenda Item 134 - Proposed Relocation of Wokingham Library

The first time I was aware of this proposal was when the Executive agenda was published last Wednesday although the Town Council and local members were made aware of this on the 22nd of February - more than a month ago.

Have you had any response from the Town Council or local members to give support to the view expressed at the start of the report that this proposal will offer better access and parking to existing users of the library, and will allow them to combine visits with other activities.

Answer

The Town Council and local Members were advised on 22 February as you say. Obviously quite a lot of people do ask Members for support for them, but in addition we have got a response from Lynn Forbes who is one of the independent Members from Wokingham Town Council who said that she was very happy to support the proposal

Supplementary Question

Obviously you have accepted the principle of consultation. It is unfortunate that you have not extended any further than that, giving people a wider opportunity. You referred already to the outcome of the library offer, which is an extract of the thing we have been sent, together with a bill for £2,000. This was published around the same time.

What I do not understand is why no opportunity was taken at this stage to notify people that there is a proposal to relocate Wokingham Library from where it is? You make an assumption and you make this statement that this will offer improved access without talking to the users. I am not a great fan of multi-storey car parks, for example. I am prejudiced - I drive badly so I do not want to park my car there. I would much rather have a one level car park. So it is no good for me. My mobility scooter which will coming soon I think, does it offer me better access? These are just examples where I feel you have given no thought whatsoever.

Supplementary Answer

As I said I have had a good conversation with you earlier and I am very interested in your feedback. The actual car park for the swimming pool will be single floor so you need not worry about your parking abilities or your mobility scooter. As I say, there will be plenty of opportunity both through the planning process and also prior to that, for people to provide views and ideas about the design and actually try and get some input as to what the future facility will look like. If we get this right it could really be an asset for the whole Borough and also Wokingham itself.

Councillor Baker added that a facility which was on one floor must be better than a facility which was on multiple floors for those with mobility issues.

130. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members

130.1 Prue Bray asked the Executive Member for Resident Services the following question:

Question

Why the lack of consultation with residents on the proposed relocation of Wokingham Library?

Answer

I think I have answered that. We did a lot of consultation as part of the library offer and it was quite clear from that, that people were keen on collocation of facilities which allows us and will allow us to reduce the cost of running facilities and as we have done previously, just recently, increase the opening hours and increase the provision of libraries. We are one of the few councils in the country that has actually managed to improve our library service rather than reducing it or shutting libraries. You know I am very passionate about libraries. I believe this is a great opportunity and I look forward to emails from anybody and everybody, plus a proper opportunity to comment on the proposals as they become published in the next few weeks. Expect to have something on the Council's website in about a month's time which will give more detail.

Supplementary Question

The previous consultation did not refer to any specific library moving so perhaps you would like to comment on that. I think I would like to pick up the comment you made earlier this evening which is about this not being a formal consultation but informal consultation apart from the planning bit of it which is a formal planning consultation, which is an entirely different thing. How will library users know that there is a consultation and how to respond to it and will they actually be given an opportunity to influence the outcome?

Supplementary Answer

I can guarantee they will have the opportunity to influence the outcome. We will be putting posters up around the area and also within the libraries and we will be providing the opportunity for people to feed back. We will make sure it gets plenty of publicity as I am sure our friends in the Press will, and I am very much looking forward to people getting involved in the project and actually telling us a bit about what they want as well.

130.2 Imogen Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Resident Services the following question which due to her inability to attend the meeting was asked by Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey:

Question

Agenda Item 134 - Relocation of Wokingham Library

Why was this proposal kept secret from many Wokingham Borough Members until now?

Answer

I would like to reassure Members and the public that there has been no "secrecy" around proposals to relocate Wokingham library. The proposal to consider moving the library is a further step towards improving local services, and in line with the feedback we have received in support of exploring ways to provide greater flexibility within our library services whilst still retaining the core elements that residents clearly value.

This proposal is another step in the realisation of the Library Offer and the Carnival Phase 2 development, as the Council now begins to look at more detail at the land uses that could make up this exciting development and the proposed layout and design of the facilities.

The principal of moving the library has become public at the expected time and it is now the correct time to ask residents and users what they think. Everyone will have the opportunity to have their say on the detailed proposals for the Carnival Phase 2 scheme during next month's public engagement.

The decision to be taken tonight is one of a matter of principal and, should Executive agree this evening, this principal will be subject to further design and feasibility work. The library will not be moving until 2021 if the design and feasibility work is successful and there is plenty of opportunity for Members and the public to contribute to the detailed design processes between now and then.

130.3 Clive Jones asked the Executive Member for Resident Services the following question:

Question

How much have you just spent on updating the existing Wokingham Library?

Answer

We have just put in four self-service kiosks and new RFID scanners for the staff, a new counter, and some associated installation and decorated works. In total these improvements are budgeted to cost £47,000.

In making this investment, it should be understood that it is expected that the self-service kiosks and the RFID scanners will still be in use in 2021 and will therefore be redeployed within the new library site in the Carnival Phase 2 development. The new library counter is a modular design and can also be reused in another location.

As is stated the adoption of the Library Offer saved us around about £130,000 per year and allowed us to increase our opening times by 17.5 hours a week. I think that is very important because I believe very strongly that libraries are used by large numbers of the population and I think that they are a very valuable asset, particularly for school children and also the elderly. So I am very proud of the fact that we have managed to increase the use of libraries and invest in new technology and move them forward and I am looking forward to this proposal and helping that further.

Supplementary Question

Do you think that it would have been better to wait until 2021 to spend the £47,000 and do you consider that this money has been well spent now that you are relocating the library, or do you think that it is a waste of the Council's scarce resources?

Supplementary Answer

I think it is the right time to do it. The only resources that we spent on Wokingham Library that will be 'wasted', is a bit of paint and that will probably be requiring repainting in 2021, so I think that what we have done is quite correct and I am quite happy to stand behind it and I am really looking forward to moving this project forward.

130.4 Rachelle Shepherd-Dubey asked the Executive Member for Resident Services the following question:

Question

Will the Elevate Hub be included in the proposal for the new Library site?

Answer

The honest answer Rachelle is I do not know yet. The Elevate Hub is funded by time-limited Government and EU subsidy funds. Work is ongoing to look at longer term options for this service in that context and the future funding availability and the 21st Century Council programme.

The specific details of which services will be available or located with the proposed library within the Carnival Phase 2 development is still to be determined. It is four years between this 'in principle' decision and the actual relocation. I think the Elevate Hub provides very important services for NEETs and to increase the employment in the area, but at the moment we just do not know. It depends on the funding.

Supplementary Question

Will the money made from selling the Carnival Pool car park and the library site itself be used for youth services or to prop up the Carnival Pool development?

Supplementary Answer

I cannot answer the question on the Carnival Pool development other than I think that it is funded and therefore does not require sale of other facilities. If anyone disagrees with it, could they possibly correct me? The long term options for the site really have not been looked at yet. There is no guarantee that we will sell it all. I do not know what we are going to do with the current site. Once we decide what we are going to do with the current site and I have a view about what we are going to do about the current site we will of course consult on that separately.

It was clarified that Councillor Shepherd-DuBey's supplementary question had referred to the car park on the current library site as opposed to the Carnival Pool car park. Councillor Pollock commented that the car park would continue to generate income via car parking charges until or unless it was redeveloped.

135. RELOCATION OF WOKINGHAM LIBRARY

The Executive considered a report relating to the Relocation of Wokingham Library to the Carnival Pool site which would provide the Library Service with greater flexibility and adaptability in its service delivery.

The Executive Member for Resident Services outlined the rationale for the proposed relocation.

Councillor Jorgensen advised that she wished to add a third recommendation which was asking the Executive to agree to the proposal being publicised as soon as practical to enable feedback on these proposals and subsequently the design. Feedback from users and other residents on what they would like to see was a vital part of the process.

Members agreed that the proposed collocation was an exciting proposal. Councillor Pollock commented that it would allow people to take advantage of the leisure offer and that the possibility of some business related work space could be considered.

Councillor Dolinski commented that he hoped that schools would be encouraged to participate in the consultation and that the opportunities which the proposal could bring would be highlighted. Councillor Jorgensen commented that continued good access to libraries was important particularly for young children and school children. Library staff had worked hard to improve footfall and initiatives such as 'Read with Dad,' 'Rhyme Time' and the 'Summer Reading Challenge' had helped contribute to this success. She went on to comment that the current library had a lot of wasted space as a result of the stairs and being on two levels and that access could be improved.

Councillor Baker emphasised that no other local authority in Berkshire had built a new library, increased footfall and put in new technology.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) it be agreed in principle to relocate Wokingham Library to a new building on the Carnival Phase II site;
- 2) approval to relocate is subject to a full impact assessment and detailed business case being agreed by the Executive Member for Resident Services.
- 3) the proposal be publicised as soon as practical to enable feedback on these proposals and subsequently the design.

This page is intentionally left blank