

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
HELD ON 3 MAY 2017 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.45 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Simon Weeks (Chairman), John Kaiser (Vice-Chairman), David Chopping, Lindsay Ferris, Michael Firmager, Pauline Helliar-Symons, Ken Miall and Abdul Loyes

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Prue Bray and Pauline Jorgensen

Officers Present

Neil Carr, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Mark Redfearn, Service Manager Libraries and Community Development
Josie Wragg, Interim Director of Environment

73. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by Councillors Parry Bath, Kate Haines, John Jarvis, Philip Mirfin and Shahid Younis.

Councillor Abdul Loyes attended the meeting as a substitute.

74. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

75. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

Keith Malvern asked the Chairman the following question:

Question

At the Executive at the end of March I asked a question about the early notice given confidentially to local members and the Town Council about the proposed relocation of the library, and the lack of public consultation. The Executive agreed '...the proposal be publicised as soon as practical to enable feedback on these proposals and subsequently the design'. Two relevant things have happened since then - the proposal has been called in and the Council has proposed further plans for Phase 2 of the Carnival Pool site including the totally unexpected demolition and rebuild of the swimming pool. For this proposal there will be a series of engagement events for people to input into this process (the series of events is 2 3-hour sessions and comments need to be in by the 21st of May).

The Officer response to the call in under consultation attempts to convince us that there is no need for further consultation on the proposed relocation, even though the Executive had already agreed to do just that.

Can the Committee confirm that the Council's intention is to have a public consultation on the proposed library move?

Answer

On the 30th March 2017 the Executive took the following decision in relation to the Library service in Wokingham:

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.

I understand that, following this meeting a timetable was published showing the range of engagement events that would be happening throughout May 2017 that relate to the proposed relocation of the library service. This includes specific events within Wokingham town centre, including the existing Wokingham Library building.

I also understand that, during this time, people can submit their views on any aspect of the proposed relocation of the library service and can speak directly to Council Officers to share their thoughts and to ask questions on any points they are not clear about.

In relation to your final point, the role of the Committee tonight is limited to reviewing the decision made by the Executive on 30th March.

Supplementary Question

In your response you say some interesting things about the timetable of events involving Wokingham Library. Your answer includes new information which I was not aware of from looking at local newspapers and the WBC website. Hopefully we are going to get clarification in Shute End as I have not been able to visit the Carnival Pool. I have seen the information boards in the Shute End Reception. From the new information available this evening, how serious is the list of events. What is going on?

Answer

I am not responsible for running the library service. However, the Committee will be taking evidence tonight from witnesses who are responsible for the service. This should provide answers to the points you raise.

76. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

77. CALL-IN OF EXECUTIVE DECISION - RELOCATION OF WOKINGHAM LIBRARY

The Committee considered the Call-In of the decision taken by the Executive, at its meeting on 30 March 2017, relating to the "in principle" relocation of Wokingham Library from its current site to the new Carnival Phase 2 site. The decision had been called in by Councillors Prue Bray, Lindsay Ferris, Clive Jones, Ian Pittock and Rachelle Shepherd-Dubey.

The Executive decision had been called in on the following grounds:

- The proposed action was not proportionate to the desired outcome;
- Due consultation had not taken place;
- A presumption in favour of openness had not been observed;
- Clarity of aims and objectives had not been achieved.

The following witnesses were invited to submit evidence and answer questions in order to assist the Committee in its deliberations:

- Councillor Prue Bray to set out the reasons for the Call-In;
- Josie Wragg (Interim Director of Environment) and Mark Redfearn (Service Manager, Libraries and Community Development) to provide facts and figures relating to the Executive decision;
- Councillor Pauline Jorgensen to represent the views of the Council's Executive.

Councillor Simon Weeks (Chairman) welcomed the witnesses and explained the format of the meeting. The witnesses would be invited to make a short presentation to the Committee followed by a question and answer session. Following the witness session the Committee would consider all the written and oral evidence and decide to either confirm the decision or make appropriate recommendations to the Executive.

Councillor Prue Bray addressed the Committee on the reasons behind the Call-In and made the following statement:

“This call-in is not about whether or not it is a good idea to move Wokingham Library to a new building next to the Carnival Pool. The call-in is purely about process.

I am not going to read out what is on the call-in notice. It's in the agenda. I am going to explain what's behind it.

First, an argument we have rehearsed many times before. The Council has a habit of keeping things secret, so they only pop out into the light at the point where they are already done and dusted, with little chance to change anything. Secrecy not only breeds suspicion but makes life harder for the Council because it prevents external voices being heard, external voices which may well have sensible suggestions to make. The quality of projects is poorer for the lack of timely external input. And has no-one learned from past mistakes that keeping things secret tends to add to public disapproval, not reduce it?

In this case, the first the public and some Councillors knew about the idea of moving Wokingham library was when the Executive agenda was published in late March. Supposedly, the decision made in March was “in principle”, and subject to a full impact assessment and business case. However, last week, the Council announced its plans for the Carnival Pool area. The drawings included a library.

The obvious conclusion is that the decision has already been made that the library is going to move – even though the business case and impact assessment have not been done. The Executive paper reproduced in tonight's agenda makes this clear. In particular, look at page 12, where just below the bullet point “costs of relocating” is the statement “The capital costs of building the new library space are factored into the existing Medium Term Plan allocation for the Carnival Pool Phase II Scheme”.

No doubt some of the Committee are itching to ask me what was wrong with that. Isn't it just being prudent to put some money in place in case you want to make a decision. Well, not quite.

Leaving aside the fact that it makes a mockery of the budget to slide in a few extra million without an explanation, I prefer openness to secrecy – as does the Council's Constitution.

I also prefer a sensible decision-making process. This project has gone: idea, decision to proceed, consult, business case. What should have happened is: idea, consult, business case, decision to proceed. Why? Because you should consult when it makes a difference and make decisions based on evidence of costs and benefits.

Business cases should come before something gets approval to start, not at the end when the Council has already committed to spending money. How on earth can people make a sensible decision about spend if they don't know – to name just one example – what is going to happen to the existing library building. Where is the business case? It should come at the beginning. Money has been allocated in the Medium Term Financial Plan, without any evidence of what the right amount is or whether the spend can be justified.

Consultation should come at the beginning too. Instead it's at the end. And when I say "consultation", that is in the loosest form of the word. The comments from the Interim Director on page 44 make it clear that there is no actual consultation and that the Council only consults if it is compelled to do so. The "consultation" added in the extra Executive recommendation on page 20 refers to publicity and feedback, rather than any formal method of asking people what they think. The very fact that even that had to be added to the recommendations and wasn't there in the first place tells you a lot about whether the decision-makers are actually interested in finding out what the public thinks of this idea.

But of course, the Council can consult if it suits it. There was a general consultation on libraries last year. The related report is reproduced in your agenda. Nowhere does it say anything about moving the library. The matter of co-locating libraries with other community facilities was mentioned at the time, but not in a way that suggested that the Council was considering moving Wokingham library. I challenge the Executive Member to look me in the eye and say that she seriously believes that people were given the opportunity last year to comment on the concept of moving Wokingham library next to Carnival Pool, as she appeared to claim at the March Executive meeting, reported at the top of page 18 of the agenda.

In summary, we have called this item in because the Council has once again hatched up some plans in secret and offered a pretend consultation at the end of the process when it is unlikely to make any difference – and has failed to produce a proper business case before charging ahead. That is not the right way to go about things.

Past experience suggests that, regretfully, we may be banging our heads against a brick wall. This is not the first time that the Lib Dems have made similar points. Occasionally some Conservative Councillors have even appeared to agree with us. But, unfortunately, nothing comes of it. I can understand the difficulty of Conservative members of this Committee criticising the Council Executive, also made up of Conservative Members. But I live in hope that one day you will find your voice and ask for things to be done properly, for the sake of our residents".

In the subsequent question and answer session the following points were made:

- The Medium Term Financial Plan 2017/18, agreed at the Budget Council meeting in February 2017, did not include reference to the relocation of Wokingham library.
- One Lib Dem Member, in her role as a Town Councillor, received a confidential briefing on the proposals on 22 February 2017. The remaining Lib Dem Members were not made aware of the proposals until the March Executive agenda was published.

- In relation to the engagement events arranged for May 2017, it was felt that Recommendation 3 at the Executive meeting was added as an afterthought and public engagement should have begun much earlier.
- Members noted that the “in principle” decision to relocate Wokingham library was contingent on a full impact assessment and a detailed business case being agreed by the Executive Member.

Mark Redfearn, Service Manager Libraries and Community Development, addressed the Committee and made the following statement:

“As we begin this examination of the proposed relocation of the Library Service in Wokingham, I think it would be helpful to understand two points about our libraries, specifically the services they offer and how these are delivered.

In recent years our library service has been able to buck the national trend of declining library usage and library closures by successfully increasing visits to our libraries and retaining the ten libraries and home library service for our residents. The way in which we have done this is at the heart of how the Council intends to deliver its library services in the future and, therefore, is central to the proposal to relocate the library service in Wokingham.

Across the borough, we have a strong core of around 25,000 residents who actively make use of our libraries for borrowing books and other items, and in total, there are close to half a million visits to our libraries each year. We believe that the continued popularity of our library service is due to our commitment to retaining a good book stock within our libraries, but is also largely due to offering a range of different activities and services for people of all ages.

Free access to study areas, computers and Wi-Fi continues to attract people into our libraries, and our full calendar of events is consistently well-attended. Our Summer Reading Challenge is one of the most successful in the country; we maintain strong links with our local communities by hosting historical societies, reminiscence events and the Rhyme Time sessions for young children and their parents is always popular.

We are able to offer these services and activities because we try to make our libraries as flexible and adaptable as possible. Our staff are always looking for new ways to offer the types of things our residents want and being creative about how to use the limited available space within our libraries.

Lastly, in terms of delivery, the library service is in constant dialogue with our residents about the services we offer and what things they would like to see in the future. We have a strong following on social media and offer lots of opportunities for people to share their views with us in person.

It is true to say that the current location for Library Services in Wokingham has been largely successful over the past twenty years, but it is also true that as a functional building it has limitations that will continue to restrict the choice and usage of library services within the town. Despite the overall increase in library visits across the borough, we are already seeing a drop in visits to Wokingham Library in the past few years.

In this context it is important to remember that the current location of Wokingham Library is just the building where the Council delivers its library services for the town and that it is the services we offer that are primarily of value to our residents.

We know this because we consulted extensively with our residents last year in developing the Library Offer for the Council, and they told us about what elements of the library service were of most importance to them, and what they would like to see in the future. Specifically, residents told us that they supported the provision of more flexible and adaptable space within our libraries, and that they would welcome them to be co-located with other cultural and leisure activities.

The relocation of the library services in Wokingham has been proposed because of the clear message provided by our residents through the consultation last year and the subsequent agreement of the Library Offer for the Council. It will not alter the services that are available for our residents, but will offer more space and greater flexibility for the library service in Wokingham”.

With the agreement of the Chairman, Mark Redfearn, Josie Wragg and Councillor Pauline Jorgensen answered questions jointly. During the discussion the following points were made:

- It was confirmed that the proposed relocation of Wokingham library had not been discussed during the development of the Council’s Budget in the autumn of 2016.
- It was confirmed that the final decision to relocate the library would only be taken on completion of a satisfactory business case and impact assessment. The Executive Member would also consider any feedback from the public engagement carried out during May 2017. Feedback received after the 21 May deadline would also be fed into the decision making process.
- The 2016 consultation on the Library Offer had set the direction of travel for the service. Officers had moved quickly once the Wokingham library relocation idea had taken shape in early 2017.
- The Executive Forward Programme, including the Wokingham Library item, was published 28 days before the 30 March 2017 Executive meeting.
- The Executive Member did not refer to the proposal at the Budget Council meeting on 23 February 2017. The Medium Term Financial Plan contained a £10m commitment for Carnival Pool. The relevant Capital Vision line did not describe any of the services or facilities to be included in the scheme.
- It was confirmed that social media and press releases would be used to publicise the public engagement activities taking place during May 2017.
- If, and when, the final decision was taken to relocate the library it was noted that the actual move would not happen until 2021. This would allow plenty of time for the service to engage with the public on issues such as the layout of the new library, the potential for flexible usage and improved opening hours.
- In relation to the current library site it was confirmed that the relocation business case would give more details about potential future uses and financial implications.

- It was confirmed that the principle of co-location of libraries with other services applied to each of the ten libraries in the Borough. It was noted that the swift decision making relating to Wokingham library was not replicated in other parts of the Borough.

Following the witness session, a summary session was held to allow witnesses to provide clarification on points raised by other witnesses.

Councillor Prue Bray made the following points:

- The 2016 consultation exercise on the Library Offer did not refer specifically to the relocation of Wokingham library.
- The May 2017 engagement exercise was Jesuitical, in that the decision to relocate had been taken “in principle” but the public engagement brochure did not reflect that position.
- In terms of timing, there was a concern that the library relocation business case would not be completed until after the Carnival Phase 2 planning permission was granted.
- There were opportunities to publicise the proposal earlier, for example at the Budget Council meeting or when the Executive Forward Programme was published.
- The relocation proposals made no mention of the Elevate service which was currently operating successfully in Wokingham library.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen, Josie Wragg and Mark Redfearn made the following points:

- The Library service had a strong track record in relation to consultation with the public and service users. This was reflected in the improved attendance figures and wide range of popular activities and events held in the Borough’s libraries.
- The major consultation exercise in 2016 on the Library Offer had informed the direction of travel for the service which included maximising the potential from co-location with other services.
- The decision making process had been swift once the opportunity for relocation of Wokingham library had been identified. However, the proposal could deliver real benefits including a larger amount of usable space all on the ground floor, more flexible space for activities and events and the potential for longer opening hours due to co-location with the leisure centre.
- It was confirmed that, at the moment, there was no decision about the location of Elevate within a relocated Wokingham library. The Elevate Hub was funded by time-limited funds from the Government and EU. Work was ongoing to look at longer term options for the service.

Following completion of the witness session, the Committee considered the evidence submitted in relation to the Call-In request. During the discussion the following points were made:

- Members recognised that the Call-In had raised some valid points about the decision making and consultation process relating to the potential relocation of Wokingham library and the timing of the different steps in the process. However, these points had to be balanced against the window of opportunity to deliver an improved library service which could be achieved by moving quickly on this occasion.
- It was noted that the final decision on Wokingham library was contingent on the production of a persuasive business case and impact assessment. It was also confirmed that feedback from residents and service users would be used to inform that decision.
- It was noted that the Council was committed to effective consultation with residents and service users. Consequently, the learning points arising out of the Call-In should be fed back to Officers and Executive Members to inform future decision making and effective consultation.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Executive decision relating to the relocation of Wokingham Library be confirmed;
- 2) the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee recognises that the “in principle” decision to relocate Wokingham Library has been relatively rapid and that the style of consultation is not as detailed or protracted as might otherwise be the case. However, the Committee also recognises that the ambition to improve the Wokingham Library offering via a new location is an opportunity that should be thoroughly investigated. The Committee does not consider that there would be anything significant to gain by delaying matters and referring this back to the Executive for reconsideration;
- 3) the learning points identified during the Call-In be fed back to inform future decision making.