

13th October 2005

Margaret Dewar,
Cabinet Member for Community Services,
Bucks County Council,
County Hall,
Aylesbury
HP20 1UA

Your Ref: CS06.05.

Dear Margaret,

I wish to object to the key decision to be taken reference CS06.05. This decision is to agree a consultation regarding the impact of proposals to close eight community libraries and to seek views on the provision of alternative library services to those communities.

I wish to object on three grounds, firstly against the process by which this decision has been taken. Secondly, the contents of the consultation document and thirdly that community libraries particularly Micklefield, for which I am the local member, has been misrepresented.

THE PROCESS OF DECISION MAKING

On Tuesday 4th October 2005 a press conference was held announcing to the public that a consultation based on the document 'Turning the Page' was to take place. This conference was held prior to the key decision being taken on or after 17th October 2005. Therefore, the decision was pre-judged and virtually ruled out any opportunity to make an objection which might be successful.

This key decision is being taken under the General Exception Rule of the Constitution, due to the fact that it has not had the required notice on the Forward Plan. The Forward Plan is published monthly following the Cabinet meeting and there does not appear to be any good reason for using the General Exception Rule as 'Turning the Page' was updated and completed in July 2005.

The decision to be taken and indeed the remit of the consultation is highly confusing. It is unclear whether we are being consulted on alternatives to 8 community libraries with the presumption that they are closing, or whether we are being consulted on the actual closure of libraries.

CONTENTS OF THE CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

The contents of the Consultation Document are indigestible for ordinary people or those with poor literacy. The research data is inconsistent, ranging from 2002 to 2005 without consistent scientific comparisons being possible. The document refers to changes that have been made in our family of councils without referring to the outcomes. In the case of Cambridgeshire, there has been a substantial drop in library use, low take up of the mobile library service and rejection of Library Access Points.

An executive summary should be produced which is individualised for each library with a clear plan of the alternatives on offer.

The research basis used to evaluate the libraries and its subsequent presentation in 'Turning the Page' is scientifically dubious. Just to give two examples, 1. Snapshot figures for borrowing on 2 days in 2004 and 2005 and then applied across the 8 libraries shows a sampling bias. There is no explanation as to how this random sample was arrived at, and no clarity as to whether this was a representative sample. 2. Distance between libraries is either miscalculated or calculated between point A and B as the crow flies. This does not take into account the distance on foot, by bus or by car that would need to be travelled to reach an alternative library.

EIGHT COMMUNITY LIBRARIES ARE NOT HOMOGENOUS

Eight community libraries have been banded together without any consideration of their unique circumstances, the role that they play in their communities, their ancestry, or their potential for joint working, arms length partnership, co-location or many other factors. The description of each library is biased towards the case for closure, focusing on weaknesses rather than strengths. A much fuller profile of each library using consistent and contemporary data should be provided for informed decision making.

The case of Micklefield library for example, where I am the local member, a deprivation score of 3 has been awarded without any correlation to the levels of adult literacy. The stated population makes no allowance for the fact that levels of literacy and qualifications in Micklefield are extremely low. Deprivation indices notably the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 has not been used. This index with its subdivision of factors would have been highly relevant for consideration and should have included levels of literacy, qualifications, car ownership, unemployment and long term health problems and disability. The estimate for Micklefield of literacy levels too low to access a library for book withdrawal is 27%, therefore the catchment area figure is irrelevant. To counter this withdrawals of audio visual items and Talking Books could have been looked at and the Micklefield increase in these items is believed to be over 100%.

The catchment area for the library changed in 2003 with the change of District Council boundaries which dropped Wycombe Marsh out of the electoral ward. As a small footnote on page 56 it also says that an alternative figure has been citing "A neighbourhood population". It appears that different populations have been used in the

report. It does not seem scientific to use ward boundaries for some data and then a "Neighbourhood population" elsewhere.

On page 44 the figures quoted are highly selective, making no allowance for the rapid increasing membership, the partnership working between library, local churches and schools. The description of the library building fails to mention its huge scope for expansion possibly using Section 106 Contributions under the Town and Country Planning Act. In fact the most negative possible picture is portrayed, when there are many positive community initiatives and there is great potential. Children in East Wycombe have reduced life chances already due to the level of deprivation and a proposal is in direct contradiction of Every Child Matters.

In summary I object to the key decision being taken on the following grounds:

- The process of decision making
- The remit of the consultation is confusing
- The consultation document itself is exceptionally complex
- The research data is inconsistent and unscientific
- Diverse community libraries have been banded together
- The report focuses on weaknesses rather than strengths
- The level of deprivation and low adult literacy has not been fully taken into account with regards to Micklefield library.

County Councillor Julia Wassell
Member for Bowerdean, Micklefield and Totteridge