



Buckinghamshire County Council

Minutes *OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR ADULT SERVICES*

AGENDA ITEM: 3

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXTRAORDINARY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR ADULT SERVICES HELD ON TUESDAY 25 OCTOBER 2005, COMMENCING AT 10 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 11 AM IN MEZZANINE ROOM 3, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr B G Allen (Chairman), Mrs P Bacon, Mr D Carroll, Mr J Cartwright, Mr D Green, Mr P Hardy, Mr C Jones, Mr A Oxley, Mrs F D Roberts MBE, Mr D J Rowlands, Mr F Sweatman, Julia Wassell and Mr H G W Wilson

MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE

Mr R Pushman	Chairman Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Environment and Community Services
Mr M Tett	Member for The Chalfonts and Seer Green

OFFICERS PRESENT

Mr R Edwards	Lead Officer – Scrutiny
Mrs C Gray	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Mr J McCormack	Group Solicitor/Deputy Head of Legal Services for Environment & Litigation and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Mrs K Sutherland	Democratic Services Officer

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr P Mussett	Libraries Development Manager
Mr B Strong	Head of Libraries and Heritage

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received from Mrs B H Jennings, Mr S Kennell, Mrs E Lay, Mr B Lidgate, Mr C F Robinson OBE and Mrs D Summers.

Members noted that Mrs P Bacon was substituting for Mrs B H Jennings, Mr D Carroll was substituting for Mrs E Lay, Mr D Green was substituting for Mr C F Robinson OBE, Mr P Hardy was substituting for Mr B Lidgate, Mr C Jones was substituting for Mr S Kennell and Mr A Oxley was substituting for Mrs D Summers, for the duration of the meeting.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

ACTION

1 **DECISION TO CALL-IN CS06.05: 'CONSULTATION ON THE IMPACT OF PROPOSALS TO CLOSE EIGHT COMMUNITY LIBRARIES AND TO SEEK VIEWS ON THE PROVISION OF ALTERNATIVE LIBRARY SERVICES TO THOSE COMMUNITIES.'**

The Chairman outlined the reasons for the Extraordinary Meeting. Chester Jones and Alan Oxley had requested that the Committee should meet to consider whether or not to call-in decision CS06.05 on Consultation on the impact of proposals to close eight community libraries and to seek views on the provision of alternative library services to those communities. The Chairman explained that after discussion the Committee would vote on whether or not to call-in the decision. Voting would be on a simple majority basis.

10.10am Mr F Sweatman joined the meeting

The Chairman invited Bob Strong, Head of Libraries and Heritage to provide the Committee with an update on the proposed consultation. Bob Strong explained that the Local Government Act 1999 required the County Council to consult with a variety of agencies when changes in service were proposed. At the October 12 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Adult Services, members had raised concerns about the limited timescale of the consultation. Bob Strong was pleased to report that the consultation period had now been extended to 23 December, which equated to an additional four weeks. Time would be needed to analyse the consultation responses and it was proposed that the final report would be presented to Cabinet on 23 January 2006.

Bob Strong intended to visit parish council meetings during the consultation period to discuss the proposed changes to services. The consultation document was available in hard copy and on the internet and Bob Strong reported that he had already received a very full response from members of the public.

Members had an opportunity to ask questions and comment on the proposed consultation. During the discussion the following points were made:

- A member welcomed the extension of the consultation period, as this would be particularly beneficial for smaller parish councils who may not meet on a monthly basis and would need more time to draw up a response on behalf of their community.
- A member asked for a timescale for the library closures if they were to go ahead and also questioned whether the final decision, which affected residents across a wide area of the county, should be taken by the full County Council.
- John McCormack advised that Cabinet were competent to take the decision regarding whether libraries would or would not be closed as a result of the consultation. However, it was not appropriate for the committee to try to pre-determine what Cabinet may decide as a result of the consultation.
- A member expressed the view that library closures were never welcomed by the public and he questioned how the public could make sense of a 69 page technical consultation document. He believed

that the format of the document was insensitive and he wanted reassurance that the consultation was not simply a paper exercise to comply with government requirements.

- The consultation document suggested that the public should be able to access the library services within three or four miles of their home. The officers were asked if the impact for transport had been thoroughly investigated.
- Although the proposed library closures were not directly affecting her constituents, a member commented that this proposal was the thin end of the wedge and it was likely that there would be further cuts in service in the future. Again it was suggested that this was an important decision, which should be taken at County Council.
- John McCormack reiterated that Cabinet were able to take the decision once the consultations had been completed and an appropriate report had been provided. Furthermore that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could then call-in the future Cabinet decision in accordance with the BCC Constitution. The OSC could ask for the decision to be referred to full Council
- A member commented that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the consultation, not the future decision by Cabinet. Her local community did not want their library to close and therefore did not want to be consulted on this possibility.
- Bob Strong was asked to respond to these comments. He began by explaining that if members supported the decision to close the eight libraries proposed in the consultation document, it would take at least 12 months to commission the replacement mobile library, so it was unlikely that the libraries would be closed before the new service was in place.
- Bob Strong explained that he had tried to be as open as possible by publishing a full consultation document and publicising the proposals. However a two page summary of the proposals had now been published on the website to assist the public in understanding the essence of the new proposals. He agreed that most people would say no to possible library closures but the purpose of the consultation was to look beyond that and explore alternatives that would be appropriate to individual communities.
- It was noted that the review of the library service had been conducted by Buckinghamshire County Council Library staff. The Strategic Director, Community Services had taken advice from an external consultant on aspects of the process.
- Bob Strong and his colleagues were willing to attend parish council meetings and in areas where there was no parish council, for example, Micklefield, alternative arrangements were being made to hold a public meeting in Micklefield School.
- Peter Mussett explained that the consultation document was 69 pages long as it was felt the public needed to understand the full context of the current proposals. The consultation document detailed previous decisions that had shaped the present day library service and would influence future service delivery.
- With regard to transport issues, Peter Mussett reported that this has been considered carefully, using the most up to date information available from Transportation on current and projected public transport links. Members were also advised that long term trends of library usage and other community factors had been considered when

deciding which libraries could potentially be closed – the decision was not simply based on current usage.

- Members raised some issues with the accuracy of information within the consultation document and questioned if the analysis of which libraries should close could be seen to be robust if it had been based on inaccurate information.
- A member commented that whilst he understood the point of view of the members who had requested a call-in and respected them for representing their constituents, he did not understand how the Committee could reasonably ask the Cabinet Member not to consult the public about the proposed changes. He asserted that the discussion was moving on to the wider issues and reminded members that this meeting was called to decide whether the decision to consult should be called in.
- In response, a member explained that the call-in had been proposed because there were questions as to how the decision had been reached and there were concerns about the 'Turning the Page' consultation document and the involvement of external consultants.
- The Chairman reminded the Committee that Bob Strong had explained that the external consultants had advised on process and acted as a professional sounding board.
- A member expressed the point of view that the nub of the issue was not really the consultation process, but what was being consulted on. He commented that in his opinion the report was biased towards closure, therefore it was not a fair consultation document. He also felt there were discrepancies of fact and the report acknowledged that some of the information was out of date. The member suggested that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should have been involved in the development of the consultation document.
- A member in favour of the call-in asked colleagues for support. She wanted an opportunity to scrutinise Kenwood Associates, the external consultants, Bob Strong, Head of Libraries and Heritage and to investigate alternative services offered in other counties, to see if lessons could be learned. The member asserted that the report was biased and Micklefield, a deprived area with low car ownership, would be seriously disadvantaged if the closure went ahead. She described the consultation document as indigestible and asserted that the section on Micklefield library was inaccurate. The residents of Micklefield wanted to set up a fundraising plan to modernise the library service.
- Another member in favour of the call-in commented that he was not against the process of consultation but was unhappy with the possible closure of the nominated libraries. He called for a consultation on the library service which set out how libraries could continue to operate within some financial constraints, rather than the simple question of whether libraries should be closed or not.
- A member raised the issue of the protocols for call-in contained within guidance in the constitution and another member suggested that it was national good practice to call-in a decision if a third of the Committee voted in favour. The Chairman reiterated that voting was on a majority basis. John McCormack advised that the protocols were guidance only and that the vote had to be on a majority basis.
- The Chairman stated that he had no issues with the consultation document and welcomed the news of the extended consultation

period.

- The motion was put and seconded.

The Committee took a vote – five members voted in favour of call-in, eight voted against call-in and one member abstained.

RESOLVED

The Committee agreed not to proceed with the call-in of decision CS06.05 'Consultation on the impact of proposals to close eight community libraries and to seek views on the provision of alternative library services to those communities.'

2 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Wednesday 9 November 2005 at 9.45am in Mezzanine Room 1, County Hall

CHAIRMAN