

MINUTES OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE PLACE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNTY HALL, CHELMSFORD AT 10:00 AM ON THURSDAY 8TH AUGUST 2019:

To consider the call-in of cabinet decision FP/461/06/19: Future Library Services Strategy 2019-2024

Present

Councillor Grundy
Councillor Hillier

Chairman
Vice-Chairman

Councillor Scordis
Councillor Turrell
Councillor Whitbread
Councillor Moran
Councillor Metcalfe
Councillor Aspinell
Councillor Weston
Councillor Massey
Councillor Moore
Councillor Erskine
Councillor Cutmore

(Substitute)
(Substitute)
(Substitute)
(Substitute)
(Substitute)

Attending in support of the call-in

Councillor Pond
Councillor Young
Councillor Robinson
Andrew Coburn
Jean Quinn

Vice-Chairman

(Left the meeting at 11:58)
Chartered Librarian
Primary School Teacher

Attending in support of the Cabinet Member

Councillor Finch
Councillor Durham
Juliet Pirez
Suzanna Shaw
Liz Sutton

Phil Oldershaw
Alyesha Roachford
Duncan Taylor

Leader of the Council
Deputy Cabinet Member
Head of Libraries
Director, Customer & Corporate
Senior Communications and
engagement Specialist
Senior Policy and Strategy Advisor
Project Manager
Head of Business Intelligence

Observing

Councillor Aldridge
Councillor Chandler
Councillor Goggin
Councillor Sargeant

The following Officers were also present in support of the meeting:

Paul Turner	Director, Legal and Assurance
Katie Smith	Head of Democracy & Transparency
Emma Tombs	Democratic Services Manager
Richard Buttress	Democratic Services Manager
Peter Randall	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Graham Hughes	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Lisa Siggins	Democratic Services Officer
Michael Hayes	Democratic Services Apprentice

1. **Membership, Apologies, substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

The committee membership remained unchanged.

The following apologies and substitutions were noted by the committee:

Apologies received from:	Substituted by:
Councillor Honeywood	Councillor Whitbread
Councillor Pratt	Councillor Moran
Councillor Schmitt	Councillor Metcalfe
Councillor Henderson	Councillor Scordis
Councillor Kendall	Councillor Turrell

A Code interest was declared by Councillor Pond, as a member of the chartered institute of librarians.

2. **Minutes**

The minutes from the meeting held on the 18 July 2019 were confirmed as a correct account and were signed by the Chairman.

3. **Questions from the Public**

Questions were asked by the following members of the public, all in relation to item 5: call in of decision FP/461/06/19: Future Library Services Strategy 2019-2024.

At the discretion of the Chairman additional time was allocated to this item to ensure that all public speakers were heard.

For full details of public questions and response, please follow this [link](#) and listen to the audio recording.

4. **Call-in of Cabinet Decision FP/461/06/19: Future Library Services Strategy 2019-2024**

(a) Summary of decision being reviewed:

On the 20 July 2019, Cabinet approved decision FP/461/06/19: Future Library Services Strategy 2019-2024. This decision, amended following public consultation, focuses on developing libraries with local communities to address challenges surrounding declining public usage.

(b) The reasons for the call-in

The decision was called in by Councillors Pond, Young and Mackrory. Councillor Robinson was substituting for Councillor Mackrory on this occasion.

In this instance, the cabinet member had requested not to hold an informal meeting and instead refer straight to a full committee session.

The reasons for the call-in, as stated in the call-in notification document were:

'The strategy document approved by Cabinet and the responses to questions at Cabinet:

- *Failed to give assurances about delivery/reservation/courier service*
- *Failed to assure how suitability of volunteers will be achieved*
- *Failed to provide a development scheme for the professional development of permanent staff/library assistants*
- *Failed to address the need to have at least one permanent member of staff during opening times at all service points*
- *Failed to give assurance that all stock on catalogue/all loans reckoned for public lending right, will be available at all service points*
- *Failed to explain how the wish to sell certain existing buildings squares with the impossibility of volunteer libraries having the funds to acquire suitable premises.*
- *Failed to give clarity regarding the criteria for revisiting the strategy in the event of "continuing decline"*
- *Failed to give assurances regarding equivalent shelf and floor space in the event of a move to other premises*
- *Failed to give assurances on ECC funding assistance in years 4/5*
- *Failed to explain if community groups would receive a discounted purchase price or rental cost if taking over an ECC property*
- *Failed to give clarity around the minimum number of opening hours required to qualify for ECC support*
- *Failed to acknowledge the flawed consultation process in that the questions were 'loaded' in such a way as to lead a respondent to answer in a way that favoured the ECC strategy*
- *Failed to explain how possible arrears of maintenance will be met*
- *Failed to have any safeguards in place to ensure that library services would be continuously maintained by a genuine community operator.*
- *Disguised the intention to close and only partially re-provide Loughton Library under guise of "Land for Housing Development, Epping Forest "*
- *Misled the public and Members as to the true meaning of keeping a library "open" by quoting Ramsey Community Library, which in fact is only open on one day a week for two hours only.'*

At the meeting, the following issues were particularly highlighted for consideration:

- Ongoing scrutiny of the Future Library Services Strategy.
- The funding being made available to community groups seeking to take on local library services – witnesses highlighted that the previously categorised ‘tier 3’ libraries had an estimated running cost of £75,000 over the course of three years, but only £18,000 would be made available in grant funding from ECC.
- Availability of library stock – concerns were raised around the financial challenge of providing stock and, in some cases, premises.
- The rotation and central management of library stock will be more difficult due to isolation from a wider libraries network in community run libraries.
- Library electronic management systems and stock accounting.
- The panel stated that in the currently operating community run libraries, volunteer availability has led to shorter opening hours.
- Concerns around volunteer availability more generally – there are a number of volunteer led council schemes and, in many cases, these are short of active volunteers. This was evidenced by recent calls for further volunteers and early closures in community run libraries due to volunteer shortages. Springfield Library was specifically cited as an example.
- The accountability and monitoring of volunteers and volunteer groups.
- The expense of electronic systems and technology required to run an adequate service.
- The disproportionate use of libraries by children under the age of 9 using books to learn literacy skills.
- Accessibility issues around availability of ebook stock due to copyright concerns, as well as easy read and audio versions of library stock.
- The professional development and support of staff and volunteers.
- Unstaffed services in community run libraries will make them potentially unsafe for children and young people accessing the service.
- The open-ended nature of the strategy as it stands allows for two, very opposing outcomes: one in which the service will thrive – bolstered by a supported community sector, and one in which the service fails due to inadequate support. The key challenge was outlined as whether or not ECC was to be proactive in providing leadership, both centrally and corporately to find volunteers and support.

Following the presentation, members of the panel were invited to ask questions of those Members and their witnesses who had called the decision in. The following points were noted:

- The difficulty in providing adequate scrutiny given the high level, speculative nature of the document. This was raised particularly in relation to previous recommendations from a scrutiny Task and Finish review that took place on 30 May 2019.
- Modernisation and future-proofing of the library service. The panel raised concerns around periphery libraries and the support that these would receive compared to the more central sites with higher foot traffic and engagement.

After the Chairman had confirmed that there were no further questions, Councillor Pond re-joined the committee.

(c) Cabinet Member response to the call-in

Thereafter, at the request of the Chairman the Cabinet Member responded to each of the issues raised in the call-in notice with the following attending in support:

Councillor D Finch
Council M Durham
Juliet Pirez
Suzanna Shaw
Liz Sutton

Phil Oldershaw
Alyesha Roachford
Duncan Taylor

Leader of the Council
Deputy Cabinet Member
Head of Libraries
Director, Customer & Corporate
Senior Communications and
engagement Specialist
Senior Policy and Strategy Advisor
Project Manager
Head of Business Intelligence

A short presentation (found [here](#)) was made, outlining the response to each of the issues raised in the call in.

Areas particularly highlighted for response were:

- Funding and grants availability – the three year grant funding would start from when the community group started operating the site, not from the point in which the strategy was available. This would be complimented by a support offer beyond funding, including access to central stock, development opportunities, volunteer training and libraries management and interlending software. After 4 years the community run library would be expected be fully up and running with their own plans for future funding.
- Opening hours for community run libraries – these would be set by community libraries themselves, subject to a minimum requirement stipulated by ECC.
- Permanent staff – it was noted that there was no legal requirement to have permanent, trained staff on site at all times.
- Staff development was outlined as an operational consideration and was not at this point available due to the strategic nature of the decision.
- An operational plan was nearing completion and would be made available to the committee upon completion.
- The consultation process met legal requirements and was based on best practise. It was highlighted that the strategy was changed as a result of feedback received on the initial draft strategy.
- Assurances were provided that there would be opportunities for ongoing scrutiny of the implementation of the strategy, as requested at the Places Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee Meeting on the 18 July 2019.
- The operational budget for the libraries service would increase by £1.1 million in the next financial year, and that a one-off capital spend of £3 million had been agreed for delivering the new strategy.

Following the presentation, members of the committee were invited by the Chairman to ask questions. Key points noted were:

- ECC setting governance and operating standards with community run libraries. Assurances were provided that the intention would be for all community run libraries to follow common standards.
- Clarity around what constitutes an 'assured minimum service' for each library.

- The piecemeal, case by case approach to identifying opportunities and challenges when working with community groups.
- The need for service level agreements with each community run library to determine a minimum expectation of service. It was noted that this would be included in the operational plan.
- The cabinet member's response to the recommendations of the scrutiny Task and Finish review that took place on 30 May 2019. It was noted that these were focussed on operational areas and would be addressed in the operational plan.
- Limited opportunity for early scrutiny of the consultation document. It was noted that, had the draft been circulated and scrutinised well in advance of consultation, it might have minimised a number of the concerns raised by the committee.

The Chairman then confirmed that the Committee had no further questions.

(d) Motion proposed and the decision of the Committee

- i) It was proposed by Councillor Hillier that the decision be implemented without delay.
- ii) The motion was seconded by Councillor Metcalfe.
- iii) A request was made for the vote to be taken by means of recorded vote. The numbers in favour did not meet the constitutional threshold so the request was denied.
- iv) Upon being put to the meeting the motion was won by 9 votes to 4, with the Chairman abstaining.
- v) Councillors Aspinell, Pond, Scordis & Turrell requested that their votes against the motion be recorded.

Resolved:

The committee resolved that the decision be implemented without delay.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The Committee would meet next at 10.30am on Thursday 23 September 2019 in Committee Room 1, County Hall.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 12.11 pm.

Councillor Ian Grundy
Chairman
8 August 2019