



MINUTES OF THE CALL IN OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE **Wednesday, 27 April 2011 at 7.30 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Castle (Chair) and Councillors Mrs Bacchus, Denselow, Gladbaum, Kabir and Lorber and Councillor H B Patel.

Also Present: Councillors Beck, Cheese, Colwill, John OBE (Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Corporate Strategy and Policy Co-ordination), Jones (Lead Member for Human Resources and Diversity, Local Democracy and Consultation) and Powney (Lead Member for Environment, Planning and Culture).

Apologies were received from: Councillor B M Patel.

1. Declarations of personal and prejudicial interests

Councillor Lorber declared an interest as director of Friends of Barham Library in relation to item 4, however the interest was not considered prejudicial and he remained present to consider and vote on this item.

2. Minutes of the last meeting held on 2 March 2011

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the meeting of 2 March 2011 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

3. Matters arising

None.

4. Call-in of Executive decisions from the meeting of the Executive held on 11 April 2011

Decisions made by the Executive on 11 April 2011 in respect of the report below were called in for consideration by the Call In Overview and Scrutiny Committee in accordance with Standing Orders 6 (b) and 18.

Library Transformation Project

One group of councillors called in the decisions for the following reasons:-

- To consider fully, the alternative options proposed by the various campaign groups seeking to save their local library.
- To make recommendations for a new model of library provision which will safeguard the libraries from the threat of closure.

- To consider the flaws in the consultation.

Another group of councillors called in the decisions for the following reasons:-

- To fully discuss the implications on the borough of the closures of the six libraries
- To consider the results of the consultation and the conclusions drawn by Council Officers which were accepted by the Executive.
- To fully consider the alternative proposals put forward by residents and campaign groups which to date have not been properly examined and to allow them more time to refine their plans
- To fully investigate all proposed business plans put forward by all campaign groups
- To discuss fully the impact of the closures on age and race equality issues.

Suggested action for the Call-in Overview and Scrutiny Committee to take:-

One group of councillors suggested the following:-

- To consider the full implications of the decision and to discuss alternative methods of library service delivery.

Another group of councillors suggested the following:-

- To consider how to support community and other groups in running their library services locally by providing sufficient time for business plans to be developed.
- To consider possible efficiency savings and the use of the Council's financial reserves to enable further library service delivery.

At the invitation of the Chair, Councillor Lorber, one of the councillors who had called in this item, was invited to summarise the reasons for call in for his group. He emphasised the need to look at the alternative options proposed by the various organisations for libraries proposed for closure to continue to remain open in more detail, to take into greater account these alternative proposals for future library provision which will safeguard the libraries from the threat of closure and to address concerns in respect of the consultation that had been undertaken. Councillor Lorber added that all the issues in respect of the decision made should be considered, in particular the impact it will have on young people.

Councillor H B Patel, one of the councillors who had called in this item, was then invited to summarise his group's reasons for call in. Councillor H B Patel began by stating that the proposed closure of six libraries would impact upon the entire borough, whilst the consultation process also needed to be scrutinised. He stated that all alternative proposals made by various organisations should be afforded more time and given appropriate guidance to develop their proposals that may be more acceptable to the council's criteria.

The Chair then invited representatives of Brent Youth Parliament to address the committee. Members heard that Brent Youth Parliament represented the 72,000 or so young people who lived in the borough. Kishan Parshotam, Chair of Brent Youth

Parliament, highlighted three areas of particular concern in respect of the proposals. These included the loss of study space because of library closures at an important time for students who would be studying during the exam period over the summer, the long term impact on library services on educational standards, particularly in light of the improvements achieved in Brent in recent years and concerns regarding the lack of consultation and not taking into account the views expressed by young people. Although it was acknowledged that savings needed to be made, greater consideration needed to be given to the detrimental effects of closing libraries affecting vulnerable groups in particular and students' ability to achieve the increasingly higher grades required to obtain places at universities.

In reply to queries from Members, Kishan Parshotam felt that there would be insufficient study spaces provided by the libraries that were to remain open, whilst Sunday opening would not be of particular benefit as most students would use the libraries during the other days of the week. He expressed concern that study space would continue to be an issue until the remaining libraries' upgrades were completed, a process that may take two years. Kishan Parshotam confirmed that he wished the committee to recommend to the Executive that they ensure that existing libraries or suitable alternative local premises continue to be available for young people during the 2011 exam period; that the Executive reconsider the implications and consequences of closing six libraries on young people living in areas nearby; and that the Executive consider the provision of facilities to access computers and revision space during exam periods in subsequent years in those areas where libraries are being closed and in addition that the Executive ensure that as far as possible young people are made aware of these facilities.

The Chair invited Jacqueline Bunce-Linsell, representing Preston Community Library, to address the committee. Jacqueline Bunce-Linsell explained that the council had acknowledged that Preston Community Library had submitted their proposals in time for the deadline, however due to communication issues the proposals had not been considered in time for the report submitted to the Executive. She stated that she was still awaiting information concerning the council's criterion to take on the library buildings proposed for closure and other important details such as insurance, electricity and rates costs. Jacqueline Bunce-Linsell also asserted that the application had not been assessed in the same way as other proposals and queried why certain appraisal factors were considered for her application, but not for Montessori School. Members heard that Preston Community Library had not provided some cost details in the application as it had not received the relevant information from the council and she reiterated that her proposals would allow the library to continue to operate at no cost to the council. Jacqueline Bunce-Linsell stated that should Preston Community Library obtain charity status, a Barclays Bank Business Manager had advised that the library could operate at costs of around £40,000 - £45,000 a year. Members heard that Preston Library was the only library that had no steps and that its closure would be discriminating against disabled people.

Jacqueline Bunce-Linsell requested that the committee recommend to the Executive that the information that she had requested be provided; that Preston Community Library be given time to act upon the necessary information to complete and submit their business plan and hold subsequent discussions with the council; and in the meantime the decision to close Preston Library be postponed.

The Chair then invited David Butcher, a local resident, to address the committee. David Butcher began by stating that the council had indicated that there was a preference that any alternative proposals be at no cost to the council and not that all proposals must be at no cost to the council. He suggested that the council's criteria should be published so that all organisations could re-submit their proposals, adding that alternative proposals for Kensal Rise Library would have been much different if the necessary information had been provided. With regard to improving the remaining libraries, David Butcher stated that these may take some time and he suggested that more consideration needed to be given as to how the space lost through the closures could be re-provided more quickly. He also felt that the consultation response from schools was particularly low and that there should be a re-consultation exercise to include the views of both students and staff.

Linda Green, representing the Save Preston Library Campaign, was invited by the Chair to address the committee. She informed Members that some 6,000 residents had signed the Save Preston Library petition which had been presented to the Executive on 11 April. She stated that she had contacted a number of schools about the consultation, all of which had told her that they had not seen any consultation documents, whilst one school had claimed it was not even aware of proposals to close some libraries. Members heard that Preston Manor and Wembley High schools and Oakington Manor, Preston Park and Barham Primary schools were amongst those who had claimed they had not received consultation documents. Linda Green felt that there had not been a full consideration of the alternative proposals put forward which had to be hurriedly prepared in any case because of the short deadlines given. She suggested that an independent review of libraries could be undertaken, perhaps by another local authority. In respect of Preston library, there were a high proportion of older, younger and disabled people who used it. Young people in particular had stated how much they enjoyed using the library which was also used by five schools. Linda Green queried whether Kingsbury library would have sufficient capacity to take on former Preston library users and where would these users go whilst Kingsbury library was being upgraded. It was also commented that bus travel to the Town Hall library was not convenient. Members heard that Preston library had been refurbished relatively recently and was fit for purpose. Linda Green suggested the committee recommend to the Executive that schools be properly consulted and their responses to it be fully considered and that responses received to date also be considered in more detail.

During discussion by Members, Councillor Kabir commented that the Executive report did address some issues with regard to providing sufficient study space for students and that there were a number of ways that could be considered to facilitate this. Councillor Gladbaum acknowledged that some difficult decisions have had to be made, however the library transformation programme would offer a better library service in the long term. This would include a number of improvements such as longer opening hours and Sunday opening. She stated that schools could potentially be used to provide additional study space and offered the ideal environment for such a provision. She advised that a meeting of the School Improvement Service on 28 April would include discussion on whether schools could be used for this purpose during the school holidays.

Councillor H B Patel acknowledged the need for students to have access to quiet spaces to study, especially during the exam period and he expressed concern that

some students may now have to travel some distance for such provision. He enquired whether the alternative study space locations had been identified and if so what were the costs involved, adding that the libraries due to close were funded to operate until September. In respect of the alternative proposals, Councillor H B Patel felt that there was a distinct lack of terms of reference from which the organisations could base their applications on and information from the council was either lacking or not provided in sufficient time. He expressed concern that schools may not have been afforded a proper opportunity to respond to the consultation and that greater consideration of those who had responded needed to be undertaken before determining a final view, especially as the majority of the responses were against the library closures.

Councillor Lorber commented that as yet there had been no formal discussions with staff and trade unions in respect of Saturday and Sunday openings and as a result he sought views as to how confident the council was that staff would be willing to work on these days. He felt that the concerns raised by the Brent Youth Parliament concerning study space were compelling and that their recommendations should be agreed to ensure students' study was not interrupted during the exam period. With regard to the measures referred to in section 4.5 of the Executive report concerning support for children, young people and families, he stated that none had any timescales or guarantees that they would be in place in time for the exam period. In view of this, Councillor Lorber felt that it would be appropriate to keep those libraries proposed for closure open until 31 August, after the exam period had finished so as not to disrupt students' revision. He suggested that keeping schools open in the holiday period as an alternative way of providing student space would have financial implications that would negate some of the savings intended from the proposals. Councillor Lorber sought further details as to what information was provided to the organisations submitting alternative proposals and at what point was it provided. He asked whether the organisations were informed prior to submitting their applications that they would need to factor in any rental or insurance costs and he suggested that an information memorandum should have been provided to them. He referred to page 141 of the appendix to the Executive report which set out the criteria for the alternative proposals and he suggested that this had not been directly communicated to the organisations involved prior to their applications and at what stage were they informed that they needed to address these specific points. He enquired why Preston Community Library's request for such information had been treated as a Freedom of Information request and suggested that any such details may have been provided too late and therefore it was unfair to reject its proposals on the basis of not providing sufficient information in certain areas and in addition this application's proposals would be at no cost to the council.

In respect of the consultation, Councillor Lorber stated that details of the letter sent to schools was not included in the report and he sought further information on this and asked whether each school had received exactly the same letter. Of those schools who had not responded, he enquired why they had not been reminded that their response was awaited. Councillor Lorber suggested that those schools in areas where libraries were proposed to close should be re-consulted. He commented that Brent Magazine's publicity of the library transformation programme had not made any mention of proposed closures to specific libraries. An explanation was sought as to why Neasden library was proposed for closure, even though it was amongst the more heavily used in the borough and further clarity was

sought as to the reasons alluding to deprivation to keep South Kilburn library open, particularly as St Raphael's Estate in Neasden was a similarly deprived area. In addition, the proposed closure of nearby Cricklewood library would mean that Dollis Hill residents' library provision had been especially impacted upon and he asked that there be a reconsideration of the proposed closures of Neasden and Cricklewood libraries. Councillor Lorber maintained that the library operated by Camden council the opposite side of the road from South Kilburn library was more frequently used by local residents as it had better facilities and was easier to access. In view of this, he felt that arrangements should be made to facilitate Brent South Kilburn residents to use the Camden library. Councillor Lorber commented that the council's press release on the proposed library closures had cited lack of use as a reason for proposed closure and there was no mention of deprivation being a factor.

In reference to the Preston Community Library application, the Chair felt that clarification needed to be ascertained as to whether the applicant's request for information was being dealt with in the most appropriate way. He felt that Preston Community Library's proposals were worthy of further consideration as it would save the closure of a library whilst also appearing to save the council money.

In reply to the issues raised, Councillor Powney (Lead Member for Environment, Planning and Culture) explained that it was difficult to give an exact timescale for the implementation of the measures listed in section 4.5 of the Executive report as it was complicated by a number of issues such as giving due notice, however officers would be working on the details of implementing them over the coming period. He stated that the council was keenly aware of the issues concerning study space, however the recommendations had taken these into account. Councillor Powney advised the committee that a delay in implementing the proposals would compromise the savings necessary and impact upon the council's budget, whilst also delaying the benefits the proposals would bring. In respect of the Preston Community Library application, Members heard that it lacked details of a budget to finance the proposals and had not taken into account important factors such as building liability and security, insurance, book stock, IT issues and other running costs such as utility bills and repairs. The committee heard that Preston library was owned by the council and that if it was to hand over the building to another organisation at no cost, then this would represent the loss of a council property asset. None of the options put forward by the various organisations had met the condition agreed by the Executive in November 2010 that any such proposals were to be at no cost to the council.

Councillor Powney confirmed that all schools had been consulted and he referred to section 7.6 in the report which included details of the class visit surveys undertaken, whilst meetings had taken place with schools' literacy co-ordinators concerning the proposals. As well as responding to questionnaires, views could also be expressed by e-mail, letters and at public meetings. Councillor Powney added that there had been significant publicity of the proposals in the national and international press, as well as local papers and Brent Magazine. In respect of South Kilburn library, Members heard that there was a large concentration of residents in Kilburn who were either over 60 years or under 19 year of age or with disabilities, and in addition to the comparatively high levels of deprivation in the area, these were thought important considerations to keep the library open. Camden council was also reviewing its library service so there could be no guarantee that its library in

South Kilburn would necessarily remain open in future. It was noted that Camden council had been approached with regard to joint working on libraries, however they had indicated that they were not interested in taking this idea any further at this moment. Councillor Powney acknowledged that there were also areas of high deprivation in the Neasden and Stonebridge areas and an enhanced outreach library service was being considered for these areas. Residents in these areas could also access libraries relatively easily through public transport, such as the number of bus routes via the A5 and the tube station at Neasden. Councillor Powney advised that there needed to be a more effective way in reaching out to the wider community to have access to library facilities and it was felt that the best way to achieve this was to concentrate on improving facilities at the six most viable libraries. The alternative of keeping all libraries open would entail inferior IT facilities, fewer books and less opening hours, which went directly against what residents had said they wanted in the consultation. Whilst the views obtained in the consultation were important considerations, any decision also needed to be weighed against other factors such as value for money, quality of provision of service and the very serious budget pressures the council faced. In addition, it was difficult to get non-library users to respond to the consultation, whilst it was inevitable that consultation responses would be higher for those libraries proposed for closure.

Sarah Tanburn (Assistant Director – Neighbourhood Services, Environment and Neighbourhoods Services) advised that discussions on rates of pay for staff were needed with regard to working on Saturdays and Sundays and whether there should be a local agreement. This issue would not affect the implementation of the proposals, but the financial implications needed to be further considered, including whether some staff would be entitled to apply for voluntary redundancy. Members heard that provision of study space for students over the summer was a high priority. Sarah Tanburn confirmed that a formal letter and questionnaire was e-mailed to the headteachers and heads of literacy at each school, in addition follow-up meetings with heads of literacy to discuss the proposals were also arranged. It was felt that this had given schools ample opportunity to express their views and so it could be assumed that those who had wanted to respond to the consultation had done so. Sarah Tanburn advised Members that the questionnaires focused on seeking views of the impact of the proposed library closures and she agreed to provide this information to Councillor Lorber,

Fiona Ledden (Director of Legal and Procurement Department) confirmed that there was evidential information that the heads of literacy of each school in Brent were e-mailed the consultation documents concerning the proposals and every effort was made to ensure the consultation was carried out in line with legislation. She explained that the council receives a huge number of requests for information and stated that consideration as to whether treating the Preston Community Library's information request as a Freedom of Information request and the council's response to it would be undertaken and the conclusions communicated to Members of the committee.

Members decided not to agree with the Chair's suggestions that in view of the schools who had indicated that they had not received any consultation documents, that all schools be re-consulted and to review the proposals being put forward accordingly and that considering the proportionally high number of visitors to Neasden library and the future lack of nearby library facilities for Dollis Hill

residents, that the proposed closure of Neasden library be re-considered. All recommendations put forward by the Brent Youth Parliament, Jacqueline Bunce-Linsell, David Butcher and Linda Green were put to the vote through the Chair, and none were agreed save a recommendation from Brent Youth Parliament that the Executive be requested to ensure that the existing libraries or suitable alternative local premises continue to be available for young people throughout the 2011 exam period. Members decided not to agree to the suggestions put forward by Councillor H B Patel that the Executive be requested to consider how to support community and other groups in running their library services locally by providing sufficient time for business plans to be developed and to consider possible efficiency savings and the use of the Council's financial reserves to enable further library service delivery.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that upon considering the report from the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods, the decisions made by the Executive be noted; and
- (ii) that the Executive be requested to ensure that the existing libraries or suitable alternative local premises continue to be available for young people throughout the 2011 exam period.

5. **The Executive list of decisions for the meeting that took place on 11 April 2011**

RESOLVED:-

that the Executive list of decisions for the meeting that took place on Monday, 11 April 2011 be noted.

6. **Date of next meeting**

It was noted that the date of the next meeting of the Call In Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be determined at the Annual Council meeting on 11 May 2011 and would subsequently take place in the event of there being any call in of decisions from the Executive meeting provisionally due to take place on 23 May 2011.

7. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 10.30 pm

A CASTLE
Chair