

**Public Questions  
Council  
25<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

**Keith Smith, Chairman, Highworth Community Partnership Group has asked the Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration, and Skills**

**QUESTION 1.**

In the strategy document for the future of Swindon libraries it is indicated that cuts of at least £300,000 will be made in the new financial year. The implication appears to be that these cuts will be made to the six pilot areas. As you have yet to engage with the relevant areas and your policy is yet to be written, please indicate how are these cuts are to be imposed? Will it be £50,000 from each area, or do you have an alternative formula?

**QUESTION 2.**

It is reported that the Library Service sustains Swindon Tourist Information Service to the tune of £75,000 per annum. Is this the case? If so, as the true beneficiaries of this service are commercial interests, why are they not asked to fund these costs, thus releasing vital funds for the beleaguered library service?

The Cabinet Member has responded:

Thank you for your questions

1) The Council is committed to working with parties who have an interest in participating in the running of libraries in any part of the Borough, not solely in the six pilot areas. The intention is to work with local communities to try to move to a more sustainable operating model that does not rely on a significant subsidy from the Council.

2) The 2016-17 Budget assumes a net contribution (surplus income over expenditure) of £13k from the Information Service that already contributes towards the cost of the Library. Several years ago the information service was in a separate building with a dedicated team costing around £75k per annum. However, following its relocation into the Central Library, the Information Service is now resourced by existing library staff [information assistants]. The information assistants help library users with a range of services such as library membership, helping people get online and helping with computer use, finding general information and other services including Visitor Information Service. The Information Service collects income of £100k per annum compared with costs staff and supplies of £87k. The net £13k surplus contributes towards the Library staff and building costs. As part of the on-going review of the wider Library service, the Council will be reviewing all services provided within the Central Library building with a view to reducing the cost to Council Tax payers and this will include exploring further commercial opportunities to contribute towards the net cost of the building and wider Library Service.

**Mrs Alison Durrant, Sevenfields Highworth has asked the Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration, and Skills**

1. Both Highworth Town Council and Highworth Community Partnership group together with over 200 local residents and 2000 plus petitioners are expressing grave concern and strong opposition about proposals in Libraries emerging strategy to close all our Libraries except Central. We consider that these proposals significantly disadvantage the residents of Highworth, Castle Eaton and Blunsdon who are being asked to pay more to receive less, and that the legal duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service is not met, that costs to SBC would increase rather than decrease due to health, education and economic impacts and that there is a risk of legal challenge and Judicial Review also increasing costs to SBC

I therefore ask the Council to ensure that the status quo for Highworth Library is maintained, that there is no reduction in service or funding and that rather than dividing communities against each other in competing for limited funds Officers think again to develop a fair and equitable Library strategy and consult with neighbouring Local authorities such as Oxfordshire and unitary authority Southampton who have faced the same challenges but produced a fair and publically acceptable libraries policy which takes into account rural needs and areas of deprivation and has not cut library services by 65%

2. I also ask that Council support the suggestion of our local MP Justin Tomlinson who has said in email correspondence that Highworth library should not close and that that Government transitional funding should be spent in supporting our vital and statutory library service to have a sustainable future and that there is no need for drastic action now, thus allowing enough time for a pause and a rethink.

**The Cabinet Member has responded:**

Thank you for your questions.

1) We have made no proposals at this time about individual Libraries. Cabinet set out in December the longer term funding position of Libraries, and in its March report initiated a period of engagement with communities to shape the development of a future Libraries strategy and model that secures the best possible service, within the financial constraints the Council faces. It is clear that there will be a significant reduction over the next four years in the Council's ability to fund Libraries, but we want to work with community groups and local residents to develop different approaches to sustaining local provision. The "emerging model" set out in the March Cabinet report is just one approach that could be taken, but the Council wants to consider other ways of redesigning the service if these work with the financial parameters we have. Other authorities are taking a range of approaches to Libraries, depending on their particular circumstances - we will review other approaches as part of our ongoing work.

2) Cabinet considered this question at its last meeting and resolved that some of the Transitional Funding awarded by central government be earmarked to support the transition to new service models. Exactly how such funding will be used will be considered as the Library Strategy takes shape. We are planning for the draft Strategy to be brought to Cabinet in June, and welcome all contributions in shaping the future approach.

## **Public Questions**

### **Council**

**14<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

**Keith Smith has asked the Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration and Skills:**

1) In view of the fact that over 2700 Highworth residents have signed the Highworth petition opposing the 'Threat to Highworth Library' and that Councillor Perkins is now asserting that the Emerging Strategy is a starting point for discussion and not a solution and all options are open, will Highworth's three Borough Councillors, who originally agreed along with their Town Council colleagues to send a strong letter to the Borough Council opposing any threats to our most valued library then voted in favour of this year's budget that included a reduction of £1.5 million to the library budget by 2020, which will put 14 out of 15 libraries at risk of closure, will they now support the people of Highworth, wholeheartedly, in ensuring that we have a professionally run library, with paid qualified library staff on duty at all times the library is open and that it remains open for at least 52 hours per week as at present?

**The Cabinet Member has responded:**

Thank you for your question.

1) I can assure you that the Blunsdon and Highworth ward councillors, Alan Bishop, Maureen Penny, and Steve Weisinger have made strong representations to me as part of the engagement process towards developing a new library strategy.

All the local ward councillors and some residents have actively engaged in the discussions to shape the new draft strategy and to say how we could provide a sustainable library service for the future.

**Alison Durrant has asked the Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration and Skills:**

Libraries and Community Based Services Programme Q&A February 2016-04-12

SBC has identified that Highworth is one of 6 pilot areas where initial engagement has commenced with Ward members and local organisations around the range of assets in those areas.

2) Given that the Clerk to Highworth Town Council wrote to you in January as instructed by all Town Councillors (including our 3 Conservative Borough councillors, who are also Town Councillors) to tell you that we were strongly opposed to any cut or reduction in service at Highworth Library what action have you taken to listen to the views of HTC and nearly 3, 000 local residents who are also opposed to reduction in service?

Point 1.6 states:

*Work in the pilot areas may identify ways of achieving £300,00 savings in 2016-17, and in addition the Library Service are working up other measures.*

3) Can the Council tell us what these measures are and where they will take place?

4) Can the Council explain why the 6 pilot areas who pay the same Council tax as everyone else should be the guinea pigs for the first round of cuts to the Library Service?

Point 1.6 also states

*There will inevitably be reductions in operating hours and staffing levels across the current libraries network that will need to be consulted on in their own right.*

5) Why is this inevitable and what is the point of having further consultation if the Council have already made up their mind? Why is the Council ignoring the views of Highworth Town Council and local residents, 80% of whom only use Highworth Library and cannot travel elsewhere?

**The Cabinet Member has responded:**

Thank you for your questions.

2) All views will be considered as part of the engagement process that will result in a draft Library strategy coming to Cabinet in June, Council July and which will then be open to public consultation.

3) We are still in discussions and decisions have not yet been made. I hope to bring formal proposals to the June Cabinet meeting.

4) The pilot areas are about enhancing and varying services according to local need. These variations are paid for through the parish or town precept, so all residents do not pay the same level of Council Tax if services have been devolved.

5) No views have been ignored and nor have any decisions been taken. However, I would remind you of the immense pressure facing the council over the next few years as demand for services continues to rise because of demographic growth while our sources of income are limited or reduced. The Council is responsible for a huge range of services to provide care for vulnerable elderly and those with learning difficulties, to safeguard children and provide public health. We have to balance all these competing needs as part of the annual budget decision.

**Ms Helen James has asked the Cabinet Member for the Economy, Regeneration and Skills:**

11) Highworth library has been referred to as “Different” by Cllr Perkins. Could you please explain exactly how it is “Different”, and what implications does this "difference" have for the other libraries in the Borough?

**The Cabinet Member has responded:**

11) The library building in Highworth is distinctive, as it is owned by a commercial organisation, not the Borough and with a lease linked to a section 106 agreement.

The distinctive features of all the current library buildings will be reflected in the draft library strategy.