

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a special meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Thursday, 11 January 2024 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Michelle Blakeley-Walker, Karen Edwards (Vice-Chair), James Elson, Jon Harland, Carol Holliday, Alan James, Brian Jones, Merfyn Parry, Arwel Roberts, Cheryl Williams and Huw Williams (Chair)

PRESENT AS IN THEIR CAPACITY AS SIGNATORIES TO THE CALL-IN

Councillors Justine Evans, Hugh Irving, and Terry Mendies.

PRESENT AT THE COMMITTEE'S INVITATION

Councillor Gwyneth Ellis, Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets and Councillor Emrys Wynne, Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage.

PRESENT AS OBSERVERS

Councillor Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones, Councillor Ann Davies, Councillor Pauline Edwards, Councillor Bobby Feeley, Councillor Huw Hilditch-Roberts, Councillor Gareth Sandilands, Councillor Peter Scott, Councillor Andrea Tomlin, Councillor David Gwyn Williams.

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Governance and Business (Monitoring Officer) (GW), Corporate Director: Environment and Economy (TW), Head of Finance and Audit (LT), Head of Housing and Communities (LG), Scrutiny Co-ordinator (RhE), Committee Administrator: Minute Taker (RhT-J), and Senior Committee Administrator: Zoom Host (KJ).

1 APOLOGIES

The Chair advised members that Plaid Cymru had changed its representative on the Committee, with Councillor Arwel Roberts replacing Councillor Delyth Jones as the Group's representative.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Responding to enquiries relating to declaring personal or personal and prejudicial interests in the meeting's business the Monitoring Officer advised that:

- councillors who periodically used library facilities were not deemed to have an interest that affected or favoured them more than any member of the public; and
- being a signatory to a call-in was not deemed to be a personal or personal and prejudicial interest as the right to call-in an Executive decision was part of a non-Executive member's role.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

None.

4 REVIEW OF CABINET DECISION RELATING TO THE LIBRARY/ONE STOP SHOP SAVINGS PROPOSAL

The Chair welcomed Councillors Gwyneth Ellis, Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets and Emrys Wynne, Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture & Heritage to the meeting and explained that they were attending at his request to answer members' questions relating to the decision.

The members who were signatures to the call-in were called upon to give statements on the reasons for the call-in; these members were Councillors Hugh Irving, Terry Mendies, James Elson, Justine Evans, and Brian Jones.

Councillor Hugh Irving thanked the Chair for allowing him to speak. He reiterated the reasons for the call in were as follows –

1. The decision to reduce library opening hours by 40% was inappropriate as the reductions would prevent a high-performing service from maintaining its standards and would affect the Council's Key Performance Indicators. This effect was yet to be clarified.
2. One-stop shops located in libraries provide significant support to the community particularly for less able residents who will no longer be as fully supported. Public access to IT technology will be reduced and opportunities for residents to enter a warm environment for social reasons will be diminished.
3. Potential Redundancy Costs and the impact of losing fully trained, experienced staff have not yet been fully calculated or included in figures for corporate savings. Detail anticipated savings have not yet been provided to members.
4. The town/city Councils of Rhuddlan and St Asaph have not yet indicated whether they will continue their financial support for their local libraries in light of the reduced service proposed. These figures need to be known and considered before final decisions are made.
5. Outside organisations providing services through library premises have not yet indicated whether they will continue to do so with the resultant effect on community well-being. Financial losses from commercial organisations such as banks from loss of access to library facilities have not yet been calculated or their loss to the community taken into consideration.

In addition to the already stated reasons, Councillor Irving queried whether the officers and lead members had visited the libraries before the decision was taken to understand the impact the decision would have on residents and the surrounding communities, as well as on external organisations which used the libraries. All would suffer from the reduced opening times. Councillor Irving felt that the Cabinet decision had not considered the whole picture or fully realised the widespread impact the cuts would have on experienced staff, residents, along with both

voluntary and commercial external organisations who wished to utilise libraires for community engagement purposes.

Councillor Terry Mendies informed the Committee that he thought the proposed savings were admirable, however, they would not be viable. Councillor Mendies queried the proposed redundancies as it had been indicated during the December Cabinet meeting that redundancies would be the last option and that relocation would be sought in other services across the Council for staff under threat of redundancy. He queried whether if staff were redeployed whether any savings would be achieved. In closing his statement, Councillor Mendies added that the public consultation response was the largest the Council had experienced and yet the public's responses were not being reflected in the decision taken. Concluding, he stated that there were larger projects which the Council could mothball to achieve more significant savings.

Councillor James Elson echoed the previous statements. Adding that he thought the libraries were a soft target, fearing that if the cuts were permitted to proceed, the service would not return to the outstanding service it was at present.

Councillor Justine Evans advised that she agreed with what all that had been said. She also stated that she feared the proposed cuts would impact more significantly on the most vulnerable and deprived in the community as well as on students who used the libraries to study. Libraries also provided warm spaces for children and young people to study and were sometimes used as places of safety by them away from a chaotic home environment.

Councillor Brian Jones agreed with the previous speakers. He acknowledged the financial constraints facing the Council and fully understood the proposals, however he felt the way the decision had been taken was not well thought through and required additional time before implementation in order to make sure that the impact of the decision had been fully quantified.

The Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage thanked all for their comments and the opportunity to speak. He stated that he shared members' apprehensions regarding the propositions, the decision was not one which any member wanted to take, but the Council was faced with taking unpalatable decisions in respect of service delivery due to the unprecedented financial climate it had to operate within for the foreseeable future. Cabinet was well aware of the impact the reduction would have on communities, however the decision had to be made. Councillor Wynne emphasised that no libraries would close, the option which Cabinet had taken was the best option for the county's libraries, no libraries would close, all would remain open albeit with reduced opening hours. It was felt that this option provided an opportunity for opening hours to be extended once the financial climate improved.

Both the Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets and the Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage answering the points raised advised:

- Denbighshire was not alone in facing having to cut services, local authorities across the UK were all attempting to deal with the effects of increased costs, high inflation and below inflation settlements from central governments.
- that the public consultation had not been ignored. As a consequence of the consultation the proposal to reduce library opening hours by 50% had been amended to a reduction of 40%, this would result in libraries being open for approximately 80 more hours than under the original proposal.
- the negative impact was known as the wellbeing impact assessment indicated the assessment was a negative one; however, the Council required to set a balanced budget.
- regarding the possible redundancies, the figures within the report were based within a range starting at zero if all affected staff were successfully redeployed, with the highest figure stating the maximum cost if all affected staff were made redundant.
- That she would be happy to discuss other projects which could potentially be mothballed with Councillor Mendies outside of the meeting.
- that the decision was not a 'one-way street'. Members were assured that a working group was to be formed to look at future delivery options with a view to the library and one stop shop services opening hours being reinstated at some point when finances permitted and built upon for the future.

The Corporate Director: Economy and Environment responded to points which were raised. He stated he believed that the Cabinet did take the decision and were fully aware of all the points stated within the request to call the decision in for scrutiny. The decision was not an easy one to take. Responding to the libraries being a soft target for cuts, the Corporate Director Economy and Environment noted that all services throughout the Council would be facing cuts, not just library services. Some services would be facing significant cuts to their budgets in order to ensure that the Council set a balanced budget, which it was required to do by law.

The Head of Housing and Communities advised that the Cabinet's decision to reduce her service's core budget represented a starting point for her and service staff to develop a plan to mitigate risks relating to the budget reduction on service delivery and residents/service users.

The Head of Finance & Audit (Section 151 Officer) clarified that the numbers regarding redundancies were not yet known, as each individual would need to make their own decisions based on their individual circumstances. The Council would work closely with them due to complexities with years of service, and as such, a definitive figure could not be produced. However, within the report, the maximum cost was set out, and members were also made aware that redundancy costs would be a one-off cost, and the savings would be made each year following.

The Corporate Director: Governance and Business sought to clarify to members that re-deployment within the Council instead of redundancy was not moving the financial burden elsewhere, the staff who could be facing redundancy would be redeployed into pre-existing vacant positions which had already been accounted for within those services' budgets.

Members queried whether alternative funding sources had been sought, such as the community wind farm funds to help support the libraries. The Head of Housing and Communities Service responded by indicating to members that the Council was not eligible to apply for grants from these funds.

Responding to further concerns with regards to redundancies, re-deployment and retirement, the Corporate Director of Governance and Business clarified that these were voluntary processes to see whether people wanted to leave. Those who had expressed an interest in leaving on a voluntary basis would then be assessed to see whether it was feasible for services to let them leave. Regarding redeployment, members were reassured that conversations would be carried out with the staff to ensure they wanted to be redeployed and that the role suited them.

During the discussion Committee members raised concerns with respect of the potential impact the reduction in opening hours would have on the availability; and accessibility of library and one stop shop services to residents, particularly the most vulnerable and digitally excluded citizens in the county. Libraries were also used as warm spaces for those most adversely affected by the cost-of-living crisis, those experiencing social isolation, and individuals living with long-term health issues and their carers. The reduction in the opening hours of library facilities would impact children and young people's use for study or research work and on the facilities' availability as safe havens away from chaotic personal or family situations. The cuts would impact greatly on community groups/voluntary organisations ability to hold well-being events/support groups or for business organisations to deliver valuable advice services to residents. There would also be an adverse impact on the Welsh language as libraries were used for people to learn the language and to practice their linguistic skills.

The Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage informed the Committee that the libraries could still be used by external community groups/voluntary organisations even when the libraries would be shut.

Responding to queries from the Committee regarding consultation and whether City, Town and Community Councils had been consulted, members were assured that there had been dialogue with the councils. However, those Councils who did not at present contribute towards libraries had not yet been approached to ask whether they wished to contribute in future. Due to the unprecedented financial situation and once the full extent of all service reductions were known City, town and community councils may decide that they would prefer to contribute towards the delivery of other services rather than libraries in future.

Members discussed their concerns in relation to the decision taken by Cabinet as some felt that the exercise had been carried out in isolation, as not all avenues had been explored. As the decision required to be made in such a small space of time it was not feasible for all routes to enable the libraries to remain as they were had been explored thoroughly. It was also felt that the proposed savings from the libraries were not disproportionate in comparison to the size of the Service.

In responding officers clarified that the cuts to the Library and One Stop Shop Service had not been dealt with in isolation. As had previously been stated, this cut

formed part of a suite of cuts to many services across the Council. Each Head of Service was being asked to find cuts to their budgets. The size of savings per service, with some being smaller than others, was irrelevant as they all contributed towards the Council setting a balanced budget.

The Chair allowed a Union representative from Unison to share a letter and speak on behalf of Union members. The letter stated that:

“UNISON believe that these cuts should be rejected. We also believe that there was significant scope to investigate alternative funding sources for the libraries service from two areas in particular:

- Firstly, arrangements in St Asaph and Rhuddlan demonstrate the possibility of joint arrangements being worked out with City, Town, and Community Councils. This should be actively explored in other parts of the county.
- Secondly, we believe there was significant scope to lever in grant funding to support the libraries' infrastructure as community hubs. A range of initiatives that the library staff deliver throughout the year could potentially attract grant funding on a project basis. More significantly the councils already bring in millions of pounds each year in grant funding to provide community and social services. The example of Working Denbighshire has shown that by taking advantage of the libraries as community hubs it was possible to deliver other grant-funded services through the library infrastructure and to utilise the grant funds to contribute to the libraries' running costs. This type of arrangement needs to be considered by many more services and a review of grant-funded services should be combined with our property review to examine this question.

The Committee adjourned for a 10-minute break at 12.15pm and re-convened at 12.25pm.

Both parties were given an opportunity to sum up their viewpoints. Councillor Brian Jones, on behalf of the signatories to the call-in, emphasised that there was no appetite amongst the majority of elected members or residents for library services and hours to be reduced. He proposed that the decision to reduce Library/One Stop Shop opening hours and associated savings be referred back to Cabinet for reconsideration, with a recommendation that the proposal be removed from the 2024/25 budget setting process to facilitate an options appraisal to be undertaken in relation to the availability of private or external funding opportunities to finance the shortfall in the Service's budget.

In his summing up the Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage reiterated the fact that although the decision did not sit comfortably with him Cabinet, due to the dire financial situation facing public authorities for the foreseeable future, was having to take some unpalatable decisions. In taking the decision to reduce opening hours across the Library/One Stop Shop Service rather than to close individual libraries, Cabinet was buying the authority and the service time to develop new innovative ideas in a bid to sustain and hopefully re-build service provision going forward. He pleaded with members not to use Scrutiny as a political weapon to beat the Executive, but to work constructively with Cabinet to secure the future viability of libraries and other valued local authority services,

Councillor James Elson seconded Councillor Brian Jones' proposed recommendation.

Councillor Merfyn Parry proposed an amendment to Councillor Brian Jones' recommendation. Councillor Parry proposed that Cabinet be asked to reconsider its decision in relation to the reduction in Library Service/One Stop Shop opening hours and associated savings and he recommended that exploratory work was undertaken with city, town and community councils, external groups, and agencies with a view to securing external funding to help sustain the delivery of services provided by libraries/one stop shops. Cabinet's decision should be put on hold pending the completion of this work and the outcomes of an options appraisal on the viability of future funding streams were known. Councillor Parry's amended recommendation was seconded by Councillor Arwel Roberts.

Prior to taking a vote on the amendment members asked for a short adjournment to enable them to discuss both the recommendation and the amended recommendation. When the meeting reconvened Councillor Merfyn Parry clarified that the final wording of his recommendation was that the Committee should:

- (i) refer the decision on the 'Library/One Stop Shop Savings Proposal' taken by Cabinet on 19th December 2023 back to Cabinet for further consideration; and
- (ii) recommend to Cabinet that it postpone the implementation of the above decision until further exploratory work was done to identify alternative funding sources available to the Council or other partner bodies whether in the private or public sector.

Following this clarification Councillor Brian Jones withdrew his original recommendation and seconded Councillor Parry's amended recommendation. In withdrawing his recommendation Councillor Jones requested that a recorded vote be taken on the recommendation, his request was seconded by Councillor Parry. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that for a recorded vote to be taken one sixth of the Committee members in attendance required to vote in favour of voting on the recommendation by a recorded vote. The Committee by a majority:

Resolved: that a recorded vote be taken on the recommendation in relation to referring the Libraries/One Stop Shop decision taken by Cabinet on 19th December 2023 back to Cabinet for further consideration.

The Committee then voted on the recommendation put forward and by a majority:

Resolved: having considered the information in the report and appendices, the grounds laid out for calling in the decision for scrutiny, and the representations made during the course of the discussion, to

- (i) refer the decision on the 'Library/One Stop Shop Savings Proposal' taken by Cabinet on 19th December 2023 back to Cabinet for further consideration; and***

(ii) recommend to Cabinet that it postpone the implementation of the above decision until further exploratory work was done to identify alternative funding sources available to the Council or other partner bodies whether in the private or public sector.

Committee members voted as follows:

For the recommendation:

Councillors Michelle Blakeley-Walker, Karen Edwards, James Elson, Carol Holliday, Brian Jones, Merfyn Parry, Arwel Roberts and Cheryl Williams

Against the recommendation:

Councillors Jon Harland and Alan James

Abstained from voting:

Councillor Huw O Williams (Chair)

Meeting concluded at 12.45pm