

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October,
2022

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Bill Hartnett (Chair), and Councillors Imran Altaf, Joe Baker (substituting Councillor Joanna Kane), Michael Chalk, Brandon Clayton, Luke Court (substituting for Councillor Salman Akbar), Sharon Harvey (substituting for Councillor Sid Khan) and Timothy Pearman

Also Present:

Councillor Matthew Dormer – Portfolio Holder for Planning, Economic Development, Commercialism and Partnerships

Officers:

Peter Carpenter, Kevin Dicks, Claire Felton, Ruth Bamford and Clayton Maponga

Democratic Services Officers:

Jo Gresham and Mat Sliwinski

48. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received by Councillors Akbar, Kane and Khan with Councillors Court, Baker and Harvey in attendance as named substitutes respectively. Councillor Prosser had also submitted his apology.

49. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no Declarations of Interest nor of any Party Whip.

Chair

50. MINUTES

The minutes from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on Thursday 5th September 2022 were submitted for Members' consideration.

RESOLVED that

the minutes from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on Thursday 5th September 2022 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

51. PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Chair introduced the Public Speaking item and explained to the Committee that there had been a number of public speakers who had registered for this meeting and that he had extended the length of time allocated for public speaking from 15 minutes to 30 minutes in order to accommodate the extra speakers.

The Chair welcomed Mr R. Rowberry to the meeting, who was invited to speak to the Committee.

His speech was delivered as follows:

"I am going to start by saying that this is not about party politics at all. My point is all about Redditch Library. I do not think that the Tory Councillors were elected to demolish the Library. According to the internet, Redditch has got a population of 86,00 people. If you cut that down to houses, I make that within reason about 30,000 houses. According to my calculations, before the Council has got actual permission to demolish the Library and replace it with restaurants, that probably will not work, you need full permission from at 15,001 houses. If you do not stick to that you are letting down the people of Redditch."

The Chair explained to Members that a written statement had been received from K. Stanton and would be read out by the Democratic Services Officer present. Her statement was delivered as follows:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

"I have followed the proposals for the demolition and relocation of Redditch Library closely - it's a subject very close to my heart both as a library customer and as an ex member of library staff who spent the majority of my 14 years with Worcestershire Libraries based at Redditch Library. My time there spanned two recent extensive (and expensive) refurbishments - the first a full building renovation and update in 2010 and more recently the works in 2017 to prepare for the co-location of the DWP into the building. Having seen these improvements first-hand, and also having worked at other libraries who have co-located services within the library building (for example, Droitwich Library) or library services that have moved into buildings housing multiple services (such as Bromsgrove and Stourport Libraries), I have seen how successful this model can be - when done in the right way and with the needs of the customer at the centre of decision making.

This is not the case with the proposals for Redditch Library. As mentioned above, the library building has twice been upgraded in recent years. It was originally purpose-built as a library; it is centrally located at the top of the hill right next to the Kingfisher Centre - it's already delivering as a library (consistently one of the best performing in the county). During my time working at Redditch Library, it was not an uncommon occurrence for members of the public to come in to the library to ask where the Town Hall was - located down the hill and tucked off to the side it's far from the landmark Redditch Library currently is. It was also not uncommon for people to say they didn't want to go all the way down the hill - for customers with mobility issues, this added distance could be a real barrier to them being able to access services and support.

The original reason given for demolition was the creation of a new public square that would also open up access to the Kingfisher Shopping Centre. I now see that the current suggestion is to spend £4.2 million to knock down the library building to replace it with another building - not considering that in excess of £5 million would also need to be spent on relocating the library to the Town Hall. This seems a colossal waste of public money at a time when so many are struggling financially.

On the subject of the budget - the figure of £4.2 million for demolition was quoted some time ago, and to the best of my

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

knowledge has not been updated to reflect the current financial landscape. Costs are going up across the board, and I don't believe that this figure is still accurate.

For the reasons listed above, I object to the proposals. The existing library is not only ideally situated, but already delivering the high levels of service that Redditch residents deserve. As well as being a statutory service, for many the library is an essential service - especially for the most vulnerable members of our community. What guarantees are in place that the proposed move would build on this to ensure, as a bare minimum, that this will be maintained? When costs inevitably spiral, what cuts and downgrades to the service will be made? These are questions that need to be satisfactorily answered - without rhetoric or hyperbole - before any further action can be taken.”

The Chair welcomed Councillor David Thain to the meeting, who was invited to speak to the Committee.

His speech was delivered as follows:

“I think the issue with this report is that it is not very thought through. I think that it is splattered with epithets like ‘a digital town’. What’s a digital town? Are we going to copy Bromsgrove? Has Bromsgrove been so successful? I also think that a project of this magnitude needs good financial management, we don’t have that. I think that’s where we have the problem, back in January about the Redditch accounts. The accounts for 20-21 were not then delivered, and Peter, you can tell us if they have subsequently been delivered which would mean that we are two years behind on our financial accounts so the financial planning for this is something that concerns me greatly. I see a risk of overrun and high risk of increased costs. I think that we do not have the financial resources to deal with this and the epithets that are sprinkled around like ‘digital town’ doesn’t ring true with me. My final point, which you would expect me to make, is that the green aspect is one that has been totally ignored in the report. I think that there should be far more made of it, any development we would need a far more green component than is suggested in this report. So, I am broadly in favour of it but you are not doing enough to facilitate it in the proper way. Thank you, Chair.”

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

The Chair welcomed E. Tyrell to the meeting. Her speech was delivered as follows:

“On behalf of my six-year-old son, Ronnie, and myself, thank you for the opportunity to speak at this meeting which happens to fall during Libraries Week. I have good relationships with members of all parties, and people of varying political views; I have never criticised the Town Deal plans as a whole, but, like thousands of others, I believe these plans for the library are reckless and nonsensical.

The Leader of the Council is a businessman so surely it cannot be too difficult for him to see that spending £5.2m in order to facilitate spending £4.2m is a little like justifying buying a new kitchen by saying it doesn't match your new toaster! He once said to me that if the library stays where it is, the allotted demolition money would have to be returned to the government. Even I can work out that that would result in a saving of £5.2m pounds!

And the savings wouldn't stop there! The huge environmental impact of demolition is well-documented. Not only is the current, purpose-built library still perfectly suitable, it is smart from a recent £1m refurbishment. How can we call ourselves a 'green' town if these plans go ahead?!

An estimated 30-40% of current library users are 'incidental' - that is, passing trade from the Kingfisher Centre. That slope down to the Town Hall is a very slippery one then. As we all have seen countless times before, bad decision-making in library services can so easily spiral into fewer library users, triggering cuts to services and so on! Cllr Dormer complains about 'lack of aspiration' in Redditch, but what message is he sending out? Whilst our neighbouring cities of Worcester and Birmingham have recently built large, stand-alone libraries, Redditch Council is planning the opposite with our second-most-used library in Worcestershire. Does Redditch Council really want to be seen to be sweeping this invaluable education facility down the hill to make way for coffee shops?

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

If there was a genuinely good reason to move the library, we'd have heard it by now. Instead, we have heard a string of baseless, often absurd, justifications, for example mentioning the small amount of asbestos in the roof which, ironically, would only be a problem under demolition! It is an insult to the intelligence of Redditch people to assume that they cannot see that Councillors are justifying these plans with problems that simply do not exist! And why, after being told the plans were for an empty space, do the plans now involve building more units? - We have plenty of empty units already!

Along with thousands of others, I wholeheartedly object to these plans. I dread to think how the Council intends to raise £5.2m, and how it can justify so much waste. I reiterate that I am not against change nor regeneration, but rather I am in favour of common sense and against backward steps. I therefore implore Redditch Council to leave the town centre's most important facility in the purpose-built, central, stand-alone, and prominent location it deserves."

The Chair welcomed R. Townsend to the meeting. Her speech was delivered as follows:

"Good evening,

My name is Rosie, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to tell you what the library means to me.

I have lived in Redditch since August 1976, which is the same year that the library was opened. I was the youngest of 4 children and after speaking to my mother, the library was a very important part of our first years in Redditch. It was the perfect place for her to bring us children and meet new people. My mother also created a playgroup by moons moat first school, bringing together people she met at the library.

I was a regular user of the library during my school years, where I found a quiet place to study and revise without distraction and with all the resources needed at my fingertips.

When I became a mother, I would take my children to the library in the same way as my mother did for us. It was here that I learnt of a

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

group for young mothers – Positively Young Mums, which enabled me to find people in the same situation as myself and pushed us to create Y-me which was a group of young mums going into school to educate teenagers of what life was really like having a baby young. We created work packs that were purchased by schools far and wide. Our group managed to make its way nationally and we were invited to a conference in London to promote what we were doing.

I am now a very proud grandmother to a 2 year old, who has been a user of the library, albeit intermittent during the pandemic. My daughter takes her on a Thursday to bounce rhythm and rhyme, and takes my mother along too, this ensure that the values of the library from one generation to the next are a shared experience and gives my mom (elder generation) the ability to get out of her home to a place that is familiar and welcoming.

The reason I am sharing this - the library is where it all started! It was and still is a very vibrant and inclusive hub of Redditch, it caters for everybody, they are all made to feel welcome, helped, listened to, and assisted through many different avenues. It provides a safe secure environment, from a prominent position which is easily accessible by all. The resources it has and the groups that are held there to support the community are invaluable. I don't believe there is an alternative building for this that would be able to meet the criteria. The library was purpose built with the necessary equipment and a refurbishment in 2009 gave it the investment required to bring it up to date.

The Town Hall would not be suitable, the costs involved in ensuring that the archives of Redditch are preserved in the same manner as they are now do not really make for a viable option. For me the Town Hall is not a social venue, it is where people go with issues. It is not a central location, been on the outskirts of the town. The current location of the library is right in the centre of town, giving higher footfall to the kingfisher centre. Whereas the routes into the Town Hall, offer members of the public the opportunity to bypass the centre altogether.

I implore you to reconsider the demolition of such a fantastic resource, to add more food and beverage shops, when there is scope to add them elsewhere.”

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

The Chair explained to Members that a written statement had also been received from Mr. O. Hale and would be read out by the Democratic Services Officer present. His statement was delivered as follows:

“For a long time there have been two questions regarding the proposed relocation of the Library to the Town Hall. Firstly, how much will it cost to prepare the Town Hall and move the library collections? Secondly, where will the money come from? The publication of the Town Hall Hub proposals has answered these questions. The cost is £5.2m and the source of this funding is 'capital receipts', which as far as I can tell, means selling Council assets. The ultimate purpose of the Town Hall Hub proposal is not to correct any deficiency in the library, but, and I quote, 'facilitating the use of £4.2m of Towns Funding at the existing Library site'.

I would like to raise three objections to this plan.

1. I do not think spending £5.2m to move a popular and purpose built library a distance of 100 metres can be justified.
2. I do think the environmental impact of demolishing a serviceable building can be justified. It has been said that the easiest path to sustainability is longevity. Using a building for longer gives the best return on the greenhouse gases that were generated in its construction. The environmental cost of manufacturing building materials is huge; in fact, the manufacturing sector produces more greenhouse gases than all forms of transportation combined.
3. I think it is inappropriate to spend £5.2m of public money to enable commercial development of the Town Centre to occur. The aim of relocating the Library is to make space for cafes and restaurants. The Council will receive a negligible annual net revenue from rent, estimated at £94,042. I believe that if businesses wish to open new restaurants and cafes, it should be the businesses that pay for the construction. In addition, it should be businesses that shoulder the very real risk that the commercial units will never be fully tenanted, not the people of Redditch.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

In summary, I would like to voice my objections to the Town Hall Hub plan. I believe spending Council money to unlock a government grant of a smaller value is like putting the cart before the horse. Furthermore, I believe the financial and environmental cost of moving the library cannot be justified, and I think it inappropriate for the Council to fund commercial development.”

The Chair welcomed Councillor Andy Fry to the meeting. His speech was delivered as follows:

“I think we have made a really poor job of advertising this I think. And I speak as a newly elected County Councillor, it is my seventeenth year as a County Councillor, but 1st of September is a new year as County Councillor. So, all the way through that time I have supported the library service, the Woodrow Library service and I speak as a County Councillor for both Redditch Library and Woodrow Library, but we have made a mess of selling this to the people. We, as an Authority, have told so many untruths about the actual library building. The people of Redditch have been told that the roof is no good, the amount of asbestos is horrific, the archives had damp in them, and it needed newspaper articles to actually tell the people of Redditch that this was untrue. The archives are very important to Redditch because that is our history. It is still unclear as to where those archives will actually end up. I believe that the move from the current location to Redditch Town Hall or to the Community Hub is the wrong one. It is taking the library away from the people of Redditch. Many people do not come down this side of Redditch, which is unfortunate, but it is certainly what happens. We have made a poor job of this. The money has gradually gone up, and from £4.2m for demolition we now have got to find £5.2m for transforming this building into a Community Hub. That is £9.4m for a building that is perfectly good enough. It's a good well used building that I have spent a lot of money in over the years. I spoke to Simon Geraghty, who is the Leader of Worcestershire County Council, about what he knew about this, and he said that he hadn't seen the report yet, and that it is in the hands of the Cabinet Member with responsibility. As a Committee we are asked to make a decision here, and the Leader of the County Council which we remember, it will remain a County Council asset, he knows nothing about it yet, he obviously will in time, but this seems very

premature. I believe that the move to Redditch Town Hall is the wrong move for the people of Redditch.”

The Chair explained to Members that a written statement had also been received from M. Clack and would be read out by the Democratic Services Officer present. Her statement was delivered as follows:

“I am extremely concerned about the proposals being examined by the scrutiny committee tonight.

My reasons are varied but my biggest concerns are financial.

1. What would be the financial implications for Redditch if the plan goes ahead and the council fails to rent out or sell the entertainment/hospitality units included in the new building on the site of the current library? Considering that the Wetherspoons chain are trying to sell the Rising Sun pub opposite the site, this seems to me to be a likely occurrence.
2. Why are we proposing to spend money that should be for Redditch to buy a site Worcestershire County Council is responsible for? The library service is the responsibility of Worcestershire County Council.
The money to buy the site from them could instead be used to update the town hall into a hub as proposed. Avoiding the potential liability of a white elephant site with unused entertainment/ hospitality units draining the town.”

At the end of this item the Chair thanked all those who had attended as public speakers for their submissions.

52. REDDITCH TIP LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT - BUSINESS CASE

The Programme Delivery Manager from North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration and the Head of Planning, Regeneration and Leisure Services presented the report regarding the Redditch TIP Library Development.

In doing so the following was highlighted for Members’ attention:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

- The business case had been prepared by Mott McDonald and the summary documents were due to be submitted to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 15th October 2022.
- The high level objectives of the Redditch Library Redevelopment were to improve connectivity between the Kingfisher Centre and the Conservation Area. The plans included the demolition of the current library building. However, it was clarified by Officers that the plan was to relocate the library to the Town Hall Hub therefore ensuring future library provision within the Town Centre. The plans also included a commercial mixed use building including Food and Beverage (F&B) unit and co-working space.

Members requested further clarification regarding the arrangements with Worcestershire County Council (WCC) and the Letter of Understanding (LoU) provided by WCC. The Interim Director of Finance explained that this letter had been received by the Authority and that provided the requirements contained within the letter were met, that WCC would be supportive of the Town's Bid to demolish the library. This was of considerable concern to some Members who felt that it was premature to agree to endorse a project without the agreement of WCC. However, it was reported that the Council had been working with WCC officers for some time and that this project had been taken very seriously at all points of the process. In addition to this, it was noted that if WCC did approve the relocation of the library as outlined in the business case a public consultation would still have to be undertaken as part of the statutory process. Members requested whether it would be possible to view a copy of the LoU with WCC and it was agreed that this LoU would be circulated to Members of the Committee following the meeting.

During a robust debate, Members also discussed the following:

- That library provision was a key criterion within the Towns Bid Funding and the Towns Board made the decisions and all minutes of their meetings were a matter of public record. In respect of consultation, Officers explained that before the original TIP was supported there was consultation in 2019.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

- Risk – The Interim Director of Finance explained that risks involved within the projects were being mitigated and that redesigning and reengineering had been undertaken in order to meet the new proposed budget. In addition to this, it was imperative the project be managed effectively and was key to the delivery of the project. Members suggested that the projects can sometimes go over budget and with the Council's current financial situation this was a cause for concern. In addition to this, Members highlighted that it would take some time to see a return on investment of the £4.2m required to demolish the library if the rent from F&B area, was only £29,070. It was queried whether this was good value for money. Officers explained that the hope was that these new F&B units and co-working spaces would encourage footfall within this area of the Town Centre.
- Archives of the current library – Officers explained that this was a matter for WCC and would be included in the consultation. However, it was confirmed by a Member that there were archive facilities in the Town Hall if necessary.
- Timeline of projects – It was reported that, depending on the timing of the consultation, the deadline for completion of construction was 31st March 2026.
- Lease – There was a query regarding who owned the lease to the library building and it was confirmed that it was a 125 year lease owned by the County Council.
- Procurement of contractors – Members queried what process would be undertaken in terms of procurement for this project and whether local contractors would be used and if contractors who were procured would have contracts with conditions that trade unions would find acceptable. The Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services confirmed that procurement would be undertaken through a framework and that in respect of trade union conditions the Council would not make those stipulations as it would be up to the companies to follow the guidelines. It was highlighted that Local Authorities already met basic criteria of procurement as part of the Government framework used.

The detailed debate continued, where the green agenda was raised and highlighted that it was important to look at the long term view. In addition to this, some Members commented that having other

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

services, including the library, within a Town Hall Hub would generate income for the Council.

Current footfall of the library was discussed, and it was reported that currently there were 400 visitors per day to the library and it was queried whether this would be reciprocated in a F&B area. Officers explained that the early evening economy would be the main focus of the F&B area.

Some Members felt that public response to the proposals must be taken into account when considering this report, particularly in light of the petition that had been initiated by residents who were not in support of the project. It was also highlighted that it was important for residents to have the full facts and information available in the public domain.

Some Committee Members felt that this was a visionary project for Redditch and that the economic returns were good. However, in order to be able to move the project forward the submission of the business case must be made, which was the decision that the Executive Committee had to make at its next meeting due to be held on 11th October 2022.

Following conclusion of the debate, it was agreed by some Members that the Town Hall was currently not being used to its full capacity however the following amendment was proposed:

RECOMMENDED that

Overview and Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report advises the Executive Committee NOT to endorse the business case and not to proceed with this project for the following reasons:

1. The risks are too high, and the financial returns are too low and;
2. The Council does not have the Authority from Worcestershire County Council to proceed to demolish the library in the Town Centre.

A named vote was requested and recorded as follows:

Members voting FOR the recommendation:

Councillors Baker, Harvey and Hartnett (3)

Members voting AGAINST the recommendation:

Councillors Altaf, Chalk, Clayton, Court and Pearman (5)

Members voting to ABSTAIN on the recommendation:

No Councillors (0)

The recommendation was therefore lost.

Following consideration of this item a brief adjournment was taken from 20:06 to 20:11.

53. TOWN HALL HUB

The Interim Director of Finance presented the report in respect of the Town Hall Hub. During consideration of this item the proposals for the Redditch Town Hall were outlined for Members information. As had been discussed earlier in the meeting, the Town Hall was not currently being used to capacity and the proposals presented within the report included the potential for external organisations to rent space within the proposed Community Hub. These external organisations could potentially include representatives from the NHS and WCC. Also included in the proposals was a new Members' Suite, which could be used for any meeting.

Officers reported that the cost of the refurbishment project would be £5.2m and would be funded by capital receipts and the sale of Council assets which had been valued by Savills as between £3.45m and £5.65m. Any timing differences could be funded through short term borrowing. It was further explained that revenue costs to run the Town Hall were currently £878k per year, however this amount would be significantly reduced, by approximately £400k as the other organisations would be responsible for some of the revenue costs in the future. Members raised that there was no mention of inflation rates included in the proposed costs.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

Some Members felt that this was an excellent opportunity to half revenue costs for the Council by £400k going forward which would significantly help the Council's present budget deficit and provide better value for money for Redditch and its residents. In addition to this, it was highlighted that Community Hubs were being established all over the country and that it was a great opportunity to create a vibrant workplace alongside wider financial and social benefits.

In respect of the relocation of the Library it was discussed that, as indicated earlier in the meeting that this was still to be agreed by WCC and would still be subject to consultation.

Although Members agreed that a Community Hub would be a good asset for the community, concerns were raised by some Members regarding the costs of the demolition of the current library combined with the costs of the Town Hall Hub and whether this was good value for money for residents. It was with this in mind that the following recommendation was proposed:

RECOMMENDED that:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report advises the Executive Committee not to proceed with this project as currently described in this report, which includes the provision of a Library, instead it advises to submit a further report for the re-purposing of the Town Hall update/ Town Hall Hub for community uses as described in the report but without a library.

On being put to the vote this recommendation was lost.

A further vote was then carried out in respect of the recommendations contained within the report and it was

RECOMMENDED to the Executive Committee that:

- 1) subject to the agreement of the Town's Fund Library Business case, which itself is subject to the required public consultation, the Town Hall be repurposed as a Community Hub;**

- 2) subject to approval of recommendation 3 below, authority be delegated to the Section 151 Officer and the Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services to finalise and implement the community hub business case and to procure and appoint contractors to undertake and deliver the works;

The Executive Committee is asked to RECOMMEND that

- 3) building works on the Town Hall of up to £5.2m, (or reduced amount in the event that for any reason the Town's Fund Library Business Case does not proceed to fruition) to be funded from Capital Receipts, for the purpose of remodelling the Town Hall in accordance with the Town's Fund Library business case, be approved; and
- 3) the capital programme is increased by £5.2m to deliver these works.

54. **EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES AND SCRUTINY OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME - SELECTING ITEMS FOR SCRUTINY**

The minutes for the Executive Committee meeting the Executive Committee's Work Programme were submitted for Members' consideration.

RESOLVED that

the contents of the Executive Committee Minutes of the meetings held on Tuesday 6th September 2022 and the Executive Committee's Work Programme be noted.

55. **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme was submitted for Members' consideration.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 6th October, 2022

RESOLVED that

the contents of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 8.55 pm

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