
Essex County Council

12 March 2019

Order Paper

Prayers

The meeting will be preceded by Prayers led by The Right Reverend Hugh Allan O. Praem, the Titular Abbot of Beeleigh and Chaplain to the Chairman of Essex County Council.

Public Question Time

Prior to the meeting of the Council, and subject to the 30 minute time limit in the constitution, the following questions will be asked by members of the public in accordance with Standing Order 16.12.9.

Question 1: Ms Scott, a resident of Wivenhoe, concerning the disproportionate effects on children and the elderly and the assessment of impact on women.

'My question is in regard to the sections of the population most disadvantaged by the planned closure of the libraries. In your own document you show that children and people over 65 are the ones who will be disproportionately affected by the closures and you offer no mitigation of the impact on those groups. In fact you offer no explanation of what the impact will be on those two groups, beyond the fact that they make up the largest proportion of library users. 43% of library users in Colchester are 19 and under, 23% are over 65. Also you admit that the number of people over 65 years old in Essex will increase by 61% by 2039 and the population will grow by at least 20%, so the damage of this attack on older people will increase.

My question is a personal question. I am not speaking on behalf of a group, but speaking in the many capacities in which I have an interest in the libraries staying open at the level of service currently offered and staffed by professional librarians.

As a woman resident, I am concerned as to how you can ignore the inequality of impact on women compared to men? Women make up the majority of users (by at least 2:1) of Tier 4 libraries such as Prettygate, Tier 3 libraries such as Wivenhoe, and of Tier 2 libraries across Essex. Men are the majority in Tier 1 hub libraries.

As a mother, teacher and grandmother, I am concerned at the fact that children will be deprived of books. It is well researched and documented that learning and the love of reading and studying will be impacted by loss of access to the library spaces, books, librarians and online services.

As a local politician I am concerned that community cohesion, public and social services are to be eroded by the loss of library safe spaces, staffed professionally.

As a volunteer running a social club for older people I am horrified by the loss of access to books, advice, online services and the consequent likely increase in social isolation and loneliness among the elderly. Volunteers will not be able to replace the current opening hours, there is only so much we can do - though we want to add value to the current offer.

So my question is, how will you repair and compensate for the admitted impact and disadvantage caused by library closures on this massive scale, at what cost - direct and indirect - social and educational - for children, women, and older people?'

Question 2: Ms Miles, a resident of Wivenhoe, concerning the impact on the education of children with learning difficulties

'I note that the strategy has included no impact assessment on the education of children with learning disabilities or other disabilities, no impact assessment on child reluctant readers and no impact assessment on pre-nursery children and the word gap (the word gap being recently identified by the current government as a significant child literacy/communications problem). The closure of tier 4 libraries and the downgrade of tier 3 libraries will mean there will be no guaranteed easy local access for children or parents to professional librarian guidance on books and no guaranteed relaxed and safe children's reading / book-sharing library space with appropriate books – in 44 communities, if your strategy goes through.

How does Essex County Council intend to guarantee providing replacement services in the relevant towns and villages in order not to have a negative effect on children's literacy and communications skills, and has an impact assessment been made on the indirect costs of failing to ensure good, out-of-school literacy services are provided?'

Question 3: Mr Marsden-Carleton, a resident of Hullbridge, and Chairman of the Hullbridge Residents Association concerning concerning library closures

'We respectfully request an urgent review of your decision to highlight Hullbridge library as one of the casualties in your proposed plans. Please consider our information below, before your final deliberation.

We understand the Essex County Council's Futures Report – 2019 to 2024 and thank you for the opportunity to make our Voices heard (90% support from our 7,500 village population) and provide you with the following information.

We present our demographic distribution for 2018 and from 2019 to 2034 showing a sharp increase from what was the norm of 2.5% increase in the census's up to census 2011. Our population is likely to expand to over 16,000 by 2034, as demonstrated below, an annual population increase of some 580 over a development period of 15 years and equates to an increase of 119%. A population of 8,000+ is generally classified as a "Town" changing the classification of Hullbridge. This change will have profound implications on the Local Government requirements.

The Demographic distribution of our population will increase as follows:

| <u>Age</u> | <u>Pop 2018</u> | | <u>Pop 2034</u> | <u>%</u> |
|------------|-----------------|----|-----------------|----------|
| 0 to 16 | 1132 | to | 2562 | 16 |
| 17 to 65 | 4271 | to | 9289 | 58 |
| 66 to 84+ | <u>1886</u> | to | <u>4163</u> | 26 |
| | <u>7289</u> | | <u>16014</u> | |

Any approval of your plans will affect our community of all ages. There is the possibility of expanding the services in accordance with your "Libraries Future Plan" and applaud your perceived ambition to improve the services provided by our libraries to facilitate services for all ages, so we will welcome formal consultation, which will allow the library to flourish in the future, with which many of our residents agree.

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, as amended in 2012 under the Government Bill of 2010 – 2012 stipulates that a Library service to all is a Statutory obligation in England and Wales and we understand the Law.

In the light of the above 'evidence' 'does the Cabinet Member agree that Hullbridge Library should be reclassified into Tier 1?'

Question 4: Ms Turner, concerning the Library Consultation, seeking evidence of engaging with core groups

'In an email to me Cllr Barker stated that ECC 'made every effort to engage with core user groups' regarding the consultation.

However for example, a large residential placement for people with learning disabilities in Manningtree had no idea about the consultation or the easy read copies of the survey. Elderly residents up to this day are still commenting to campaigners that they are unaware of the threat to our libraries and also your consultation. This is only compounded by the fact that libraries did not hold paper copies of the consultation till 15/02 so there was nothing for library staff to share with users when they visited.

Whilst you held 'drop ins' at the libraries, these were not widely advertised and appeared to hold little value to the process.

So going back to the point that was emailed to me, could you please explain how you made an effort to engage with core user groups, and what evidence can you provide to prove to the public that you have reached every demographic of users within the consultation process?'

Question 5: Mr Hyland, a resident of Chelmsford, concerning the Library Consultation.

'It seems, to me, incredibly short-sighted of Essex County Council to set out on this path of destruction of Essex Libraries.

I hope the public response to the planned cuts and the library consultation, has provided you with the compelling message, of both the popularity of public libraries and their impact on wider social issues including health and wellbeing, education, poverty, loneliness and digital skills.

I hope, having undertaken this latest public consultation, it has given you a refreshing insight, to the value placed in libraries by residents.

And I hope you are now willing and able, to take this opportunity to change direction, act in the public interest, use your duty of care to avoid perpetuating this public fear, division and discord, that has sought to set communities against each other to battle for resources.

Essex County Council must STOP the Library Services cuts now and budget/move monies from contingency and turn their minds to creating a long-term sustainable funding plan for libraries. If you thought extra funding was required, on top of the taxes we already pay for these our Library Services, you should consider raising taxes to bring a sustainable outcome, and let residents know at what cost this would be per person/per household in tax increases.

Once again, we see the out of touch Tories at Essex County Council "know the cost of everything and the value of nothing."

So, I would like to ask Essex County Council to provide to me and the residents of Essex a verifiable full cost benefit, and wider impact analysis of options, including to remain as-is?

Question 6: Ms Mawer, a resident of Thaxted, concerning the Library Closures

'There is little or no recognition in the ECC library Proposal of the important role libraries can - and should - play in the cultural and creative life of the community. This aspect of personal and social development ranks highly in the 'Ambition for Libraries' document (Department DCMS).

Why is there no vision for libraries being centres for culture, the arts and creativity in Essex? Is it not considered important or is a natural casualty of a proposal that reduces the number of libraries?'

Question 7: Mr Robertson, concerning the apparent lack of diligence relating to the easy read consultation and the offence caused.

'What due diligence was undertaken in relation to the easy read consultation on the changes to the library services and will Essex County Council be attempting to get a full refund of the cost of this consultation given the offensive nature of the material that caused great distress to the transgender community?'

Question 8: Ms Patten, concerning Groups of Special Needs not taken into account.

'I am concerned about the threatened closure of two thirds of Essex County Council Libraries.

Most libraries have twelve clubs and activity groups which can meet in the safe environment of the library, along with active library card users withdrawing books or browsing on the computers.

However, a few years ago the library opening hours were halved and the number of books available have been reduced. I know this from being a member of a Book Club. Fifteen members in the Book Club only need ONE ticket (not fifteen tickets) to withdraw fifteen books about once a month. This used to equate to nearly 200 book withdrawals per year. With less books being stocked, the library can now only manage to produce a total of 8 - 10 of the same book per month.

All these types of groups are self motivated providing the members with social contact, education and entertainment.

Any closures will cause social isolation and depression to young mothers with babies, the elderly and the vulnerable; the unemployed and the disabled. The literacy of children and youth will be badly damaged. This will place more pressure onto the health professionals and the police. The needs of these groups and people with specific needs have not been taken into account when preparing the Strategy.

Why were these groups not included in the strategy for your consultation?

We want a public library service with trained librarians and a community hub provided from our taxes. Amongst other ideas, a coffee/tea/snacks machine could be installed which would produce some revenue for the Council.'

Question 9: Dr Tayler, a resident of Thaxted concerning the impact of the closure of Libraries on safeguarding issues.

'As someone who has been responsible for the care of people who may have safeguarding needs or are experiencing domestic abuse, has the consultation by ECC into libraries given adequate weight to the importance that libraries may offer in issues of safeguarding, and disclosure of domestic abuse, especially in rural communities and would this include the appropriate training of librarians?'

Question 10:Ms Vargas, a representative of SOLE Colchester, the local branch of the Save Our Libraries Essex campaign.

'Assuming that every tier 3 library in Essex manages to remain open with a service comparable to that provided now, Essex will have on average just one library per 31,000 people, without taking into account the forecast population growth of 20%, compared to the national average of around 1 per 22,000 . If tier 3 close or provide only a minimal service, this could drop to 1 per 49,000, which is almost half the current lowest county provision in England, and to just 1 per 95,000 in Colchester.

What research and/or advice has ECC looked at on minimum or optimal ratios of population per library and their impact on accessibility, usage and sustainability, and was this used to work out and plan a particular level of provision for each area of Essex?'

Question 11:Cllr Caton, Chairman of Stansted Mountfitchet Parish Council, concerning the new community hub in the village.

'Before contracts were signed by Stansted Mountfitchet Parish Council to build a new Community Hub building in the village, Essex County Council signed a Heads of Agreement to lease part of the building, as the new village Library, at an annual rental of £13,000 and an annual contribution of £7,000 contribution towards the building's overheads for a ten year period.

Does the County Council intend to honour this agreement?'

Question 12:Cllr Edwards, Toddbrook Ward, Harlow District Council, concerning Health and Wellbeing Policies.

'Have the County Council's Health and Well Being Policies been explicitly taken into account within the Strategy For Libraries and if so how?'

Question 13:Ms Fletcher, a resident of Chelmsford, concerning children's education and wellbeing.

'I was a Children's Librarian for Essex libraries for a number of years latterly on the Children's Central Team. I passionately believe that books, libraries and reading are essential for children's education, imagination, wellbeing and life prospects.

Research, some of which I was involved in, has proved that Libraries are good social spaces for women with young children; that library visits and taking part in the Summer Reading Challenge

support children's literacy, which improves their educational opportunities. Also, libraries are excellent safe social spaces for children and young people as they learn and study.

Does the Cabinet Member agree that many, many children in Essex will in future be deprived of opportunities to read, learn and grow their imaginations, which will affect their future career and job prospects?'