

Shropshire Council's summary response to the Church Stretton Library Support Group's response to the Shropshire Council consultation on the proposed relocation of the Church Stretton library to the Academy on Shrewsbury Road.

Shropshire Council notes the time and energy that members of the Church Stretton Library Support Group have put into the creation of its response to the Church Stretton Library consultation, and notes its content as part of the consultation process.

The council has responded to many of the points raised in the document through the updated Equality & Social Inclusion Impact Assessment and the associated Action Plan. Church Stretton School has clarified many of the questions that have been asked about the proposal. A summary of key responses, clarifications and corrections are made here by the council as part of the decision report.

Responses to specific points are noted below –

CSLSG

'The level of public support for our campaign is overwhelming'

SC response

The response rate to the council's formal consultation was 325 responses, which is 22% of the library's 1494 active members (Feb 2015 figures) and 5% of the library's 6388 registered members. 59 responses were in favour of the proposal.

CSLSG

'Clearly, the majority of the community in Church Stretton wish to keep the library in its current building.'

SC response

The population of Church Stretton parish is 4671. Through its consultation Shropshire Council has received feedback from approximately 325 people – 59 of them in favour of moving the library to the school.

CSLSG

(Re. the school proposal document being subject to change following consultation and further design works) 'We contend that this is unacceptable, unless another phase of the consultation is held, based on whatever information the school may be planning to release, and refer you to Woolf's guidance as follows: "Changes mid process/new options: If the public body fundamentally changes its proposal mid-process or is minded to proceed in a way which was not part of the proposal consulted upon, then basic fairness may require it to re-consult or consult afresh on the changed proposal."

'The school's brochure, which forms the basis of the Council's proposal to move the public library to the school cannot be used as a reference point in this phase of consultation, and thus invalidates the entire exercise'.

SC response

It is the council's view that there has not been a fundamental change to the proposal it made in its consultation process – to relocate Church Stretton library to Church Stretton School to create a shared public and school library on the grounds that it is the most appropriate option to deliver a sustainable library service for the town.

CSLSG

(Re. a perceived lack of available information) 'Again turning to Woolf, he states "The obligation is to let those who have a potential interest in the subject matter know in clear terms what the proposal is and exactly why it is under positive consideration, telling them enough (which may be a good deal) to enable them to make an intelligent response."

'The material provided to the public for the Library Consultation is seriously flawed and does not provide a secure basis for decision making'.

'We contend that the presentation of this option fails this test. No attempt has been made by the Council to enable constructive consideration of the "Keep it where it is" option as a basis for the development of alternative proposals by a member of the public working on the February 2nd 2015 consultation documents'.

SC response

It is the council's view that sufficient evidence has been made available to enable consultation respondees to consider the proposal being made and in a couple of instances where it has not been able to provide very specific information about staffing costs or future plans for the library building, the reasons for this have been explained.

CSLSG

'Correspondence between leading school governor Alan Fox and ex-governor Roger Wilson, CBE concerning misleading assertions by Mr Fox in support of the school's proposal in Church Stretton community magazine "Focus" February edition (readership 60% of Church Stretton households)'.

SC response

Both Shropshire Council and Church Stretton School feel that the inclusion in this part of the document and therefore into the public domain, the employment details of a member of staff is highly inappropriate and the CSLSG has not added anything to the consultation process by doing this.

CSLSG

'Shropshire Council might aim to deliver services in partnership but there has been little partnership working within this community'.

SC response

The council has been working in partnership with the community, key organisations and groups in Church Stretton for many years. The recent creation of the Asset/Service Working Group to find solutions to some challenging shared challenges is the most recent demonstration of this effective partnership working.

CSLSG

'41.7% of the population are 65 and over, this percentage is in the ascendancy and is likely to be for the foreseeable future'.

SC response

35.3% of the population of Church Stretton parish are aged 65 and over is the correct statistic at the time of the 2011 Census.

CSLSG

'During discussions, there was strong support for: *'Keep the building. Strip the service down to minimum and build up after a period of revenue seeking and income generation.'*

Raising the Council Tax below the referendum limit received many favourable comments, and was seen as a way of distributing the load more fairly across the county, while some wanted the County's reserves to be called upon, especially given the poor rates of interest on the county's investments of £126m'.

SC response

Interest rates have been low for a considerable amount of time, the Bank of England has kept the official bank rate at 0.5% since 2009 at this rate is not expected to rise until the first quarter of 2016. Even then it is only expected to rise to 0.75% so we continue to be in a historically low interest rate environment which is reflected in the returns we get on the Council's investment balances. Security of the capital invested continues to be the main priority but we do aim to achieve the highest returns possible within the agreed risk parameters set in the Treasury Strategy. The balance of the council's investments fluctuates throughout the year depending on its cash flow.

CSLSG

'The current period of decline in public services and progressive reduction of Council spending on public services will come to an end and we are determined that we will still have the basics in place and can ensure that Church Stretton thrives economically, socially and as an outstanding community of national significance in its many examples of community activities, facilities and citizen involvement in delivering a high quality of life'.

SC response

The public sector was tasked with making £6bn in savings as part of the first Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010 and Shropshire Council as a result had to find £86m in savings over three years. This was achieved at the end of this three year period.

A further Comprehensive Spending Review in 2013, together with building in the increasing demand in adult social care and children's services, has resulted in Shropshire Council having to find a further £80m beginning 2013/14 – with such unprecedented savings over a 6 year period all areas of current activity are having to play their part.

Shropshire Council would challenge that all of this has undermined community life in Shropshire – there are numerous examples of where communities have come together, recognising that the status quo is no longer an option, and worked to create new models of delivery that preserve the core offer of what local communities feel is important, but within a financial envelope that is affordable for Shropshire Council.

The current evolution of the public sector led by central government is expected to continue until at least 2020 with the gradual reduction of the Revenue Support Grant - the main source of funding from government. Therefore the drive to do more co-creation in local communities of existing provision will continue for many years to come.

CSLSG

'We have shown that the plan to relocate our library is fundamentally flawed. The Council has failed to give consultees clear, unambiguous evidence on which to base decisions'.

SC response

It is the council's view that sufficient evidence has been made available to enable consultation respondees to consider the proposal being made.

CSLSG

'The Council has conducted one consultation that was subsequently redesignated as a "community conversation"

SC response

The period of community engagement during November/December 2014 was always called a community conversation and was never cited as a formal consultation.

CSLSG

'and failed to report the most important result it should have reported which was the number of respondents who wanted the library to stay where it is and the number who did not or did not know'

SC response

A yes/no question of this kind that would have enabled answers to be collated and analysed was not asked of respondents in the community conversation.

CSLSG

The Council then, at our request, initiated a second consultation but failed to link it with clear information and repeatedly told us that the information we wanted would only become available after the decision was made.

SC response

The council was perfectly able to decide itself that the results of the community consultation meant that a formal consultation period would be necessary. It is the council's view that sufficient evidence has been made available to enable consultation respondees to consider the proposal being made.

18th March 2015

CSLSG

'The Council has failed to work up options that could deliver budget savings at the same time as keeping the library where it is. The Council has failed to demonstrate that its' plans for Church Stretton meet basic standards of evidence-based decision taking and has failed to demonstrate that the Church Stretton plan is a fair and proportionate element in a Shropshire wide plan locality approach to achieve £1.3 million budget savings in a way that is moderated by the need to rural proof the County and protect older age groups. The Council has failed to show that its' decision making is fair and proportionate across the county. We still do not know how the £1.3 million budget cut will be allocated across 22 libraries and 4 mobiles and it is not acceptable that the Council presses on with its plan for Church Stretton without demonstrating its county wide strategy for dealing with library cuts.'

SC response

The council has explained to members of CSLSG the Shropshire Council's locality commissioning approach. We are working with local communities and organisations to identify opportunities to reduce the costs of the libraries in the towns across the county to enable a library service to continue in each of these places. Solutions are being worked through with each community on a place by place basis. We are not applying the proportion of the library service savings that relates to branch libraries in a blanket way across the county. The opportunity at each location to make savings relate to the current cost of delivering a library service there and the new way of running the service that is identified as being best for that place, will inform the savings that can be made. In Church Stretton it may appear as though the level of savings is high – that is because the solution that is being proposed for the future running of the library service does not involve ongoing revenue costs.

CSLSG

'The Council has failed to follow the good examples of more community-minded local authorities investigating new models of providing library services in an age of budget cuts and austerity. Both Suffolk and Kent Councils have engaged with new models of providing library services including the same ideas we have arrived at in our own discussions e.g. the charitable trust idea'.

SC response

The models adopted by Kent and Suffolk councils will suit the particular circumstances of those areas. It has been agreed that the approach that Shropshire Council will adopt to redesign its library service is locality commissioning and the council would argue that this approach is fundamentally community-minded.

CSLSG

'We very much regret the lack of initiative within our Council and the lack of engagement with citizens in the joint production of new models of service delivery'.

SC response

Specifically through its locality commissioning approach the council has been engaged with the Church Stretton community and key local organisations – the town council, the school, the Mayfair Centre and others – for the last 2 years. For the last year an Asset/Service Working Group has been jointly coming up with new ways of working that will ensure that the services and assets that are of value to the town are retained and enhanced, and run in a way that suits local people. The council does not recognise the group's regret over its lack of initiative and lack of engagement with citizens.

The CSLG's alternative proposals for the future running of the library service in Church Stretton are addressed in a separate document.