

OPPOSITION PRIORITY BUSINESS – RE-PROVISION OF ENFIELD HIGHWAY LIBRARY

FULL COUNCIL – 19 SEPTEMBER 2017

Background

This scheme has had a chequered history. Councillors Orhan and Fonyonga decided to significantly reduce library provision in the old Carnegie library in Enfield Highway in October 2016. The space released was intended to accommodate an NHS integrated sexual health clinic.

This proposal was called in by the Conservative Opposition at Overview and Scrutiny on 10 November 2016. The principal grounds for the call-in by Councillor Dogan Delman were :

- Potential anomalies with regards to conversations on the London Tenders Portal between staff in the Corporate Maintenance and Construction Team and one of the bidders for the works;
- The inappropriate nature of providing a sexual health clinic in the same premises as a children's library.

The call-in was not heard because the report was withdrawn at the meeting by the Director of Health Housing and Adult Social Care for further consideration.

Some seven months later a further report on this issue was approved by Councillor Orhan on 9 June 2017. This report explained that the proposed refurbishment of Enfield Highway Library to include a sexual Health Clinic and a drug treatment centre would not proceed, although no reasons for this were given. Instead the report recommended that a new community library should be provided on the first floor of 201 Hertford Road, a 1950s office building on the opposite side of the road to the present Carnegie Library. It is proposed that the Enfield Business Centre, who currently occupy the ground floor, will work with the Council to deliver the community library.

On 18th July 2017, the Planning Committee approved the proposed change of use at 201 Hertford Road from office space to a public lending library. The planning grounds on which this decision was taken are not contested, but it is noteworthy that several of the Labour members on the Committee abstained.

Current position

The Enfield Highway Carnegie library has now been emptied and stripped out by Property Services. A temporary library service is currently operating from the car park of the library.

A high level feasibility study has been undertaken by architects to provide proposals based on the Council's libraries strategy which entails a drastic reduction in library provision across the borough and consequential replacement of staff with unpaid volunteers. The proposed library would be

staffless.

The estimated capital cost of carrying out these works is estimated to be in excess of £250,000 as detailed in the part 2 report on key decision KD4512. A procurement exercise has not yet been carried out so this figure may well rise when a detailed specification is produced. The part 1 report recommended that the former library should be formally declared surplus to requirements and disposed of to create a capital receipt.

Understandably there have been widespread concerns voiced by the local community about this process and the loss of a well-used and loved Carnegie public library and its replacement by an unsatisfactory, much diminished first floor library across the road.

Running costs

It is understood from officers that the running costs for reinstating the current Carnegie library (staffing, rates, utilities, etc) would be of the order of £165,000. On top of that, there would be around £75,000 repairs and maintenance liability plus the cost of fitting out with new shelves, stock etc, say £250,000 plus in the first year.

The running costs of providing an interim library if the car park has been around £67,000 per annum.

The Conservative Opposition's Case

Any project should be assessed on a value for money basis. In other words, do the benefits in doing something justify the expenditure needed to carry it out. This is clearly not the case with this process. The total cost to the Council of this exercise is likely to be in the region of £320,000 plus if the cost of providing the interim library is included. But if the Carnegie library had been left open, it would have only cost the Council in the region of £165,000.

A perfectly adequate and historically important building locally is being disposed of and replaced by a much smaller and inadequate substitute. Presumably the former library will be sold and turned into flats. This may or may not cover the cost of converting the 2nd floor of the office block across the road into a new library. The Council hasn't been informed because the reports did not cover this issue.

The Council's original proposals to provide a sexual health clinic and a drugs and alcohol treatment centre within the library would in our view have been completely inappropriate, but it would at least it would have provided an additional function for the existing building. The Council has completely failed to meet its own objectives in this case, but has offered no explanation as to why this happened and who was responsible within the reports.

Nor is any explanation given in the reports as to why existing library was closed down so quickly. One would have thought that the decision to strip the building

would have been taken only when it was clear that the NHS had committed to proceed. When the NHS pulled out the public would expect the Administration to have put the plans to close the Library on hold so it could consider its options properly. There was in fact no need to close the former library prematurely at all.

Recommendations

1. The Council should reconsider its options and retain the Carnegie Library and reopen it to include additional complementary Council services, for example: a community library providing books in appropriate foreign languages, or the Enterprise Agency (relocated from across the road), or a business library as proposed by the City of London.
2. The Council should carry out a thorough review of what went wrong in this case. This is needed because there seems to be a regular failure to manage these projects sensibly. The ultimate decision on what should happen at important milestones within a project process should be the responsibility of the cabinet member involved. In the case of Enfield Highway Library, either wrong decisions were taken by Cllr. Orhan or she wasn't properly advised of the options in front of her.
3. The Council should provide a proper and honest account of what has happened to the people of Enfield Highway. Library users in the area have been seriously inconvenienced for no good reason. They have had to use an interim library in a car park for several months, whilst the existing library stands empty and in danger of vandalism and arson. The new library may not be ready for several more months. They deserve an apology from the Council.

7/9/17