

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the call-in meeting of the OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on MONDAY APRIL 30 2007 at 6.00 P.M. at the Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Fiona Colley (Chair)
Councillor Bob Skelly (Vice-Chair)
Councillors John Friary, Barrie Hargrove, Adedokun Lasaki,
Tim McNally, David Noakes, Lewis Robinson and Dominic Thorncroft

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Paul Bates
Councillor Kirsty McNeil
Councillor Lorraine Zuleta – Executive Member for Culture, Leisure & Sport

ALSO PRESENT Edith Brown - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Celia Cronin - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Isabel Durrant – Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Alan Fontaine - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
David Glue - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
John Leverington - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Angela Molloy - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Helen O'Brien - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Julie Speechley - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Julia Thrul - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Jasper Tomlinson - Campaign for Newington Reference Library
Rajana Yagam - Campaign for Newington Reference Library

OFFICER SUPPORT: Shelley Burke – Head of Overview & Scrutiny
Gill Davies – Strategic Director of Environment & Housing
Stephanie Fleck – Legal Services
Darren Smith – Health & Safety Adviser, Environment & Housing
Pam Usher – Library Service Manager
Sui-Te Wu – Head of Southwark Building & Design Service
Peter Roberts – Scrutiny Project Manager

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Ms Ann-Marie Eastwood, Mr Alie Kallon and Mrs J Spanswick and for lateness from Councillor Dominic Thorncroft.

NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMED URGENT

There were no urgent items of business.

DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were none.

1. CALL-IN: RELOCATION OF REFERENCE LIBRARY (EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CULTURE, LEISURE & SPORT APRIL 4 2007)

- 1.1 Julie Speechley addressed the committee on behalf of the Campaign for Newington Reference Library. The campaign group supported the grounds on which the call-in had been requested and added the following comments in respect of proportionality, predicting that the worsening of the service would include:
- loss of a third of the adult lending library service
 - loss of a safe quiet atmosphere for serious study
 - loss of staff on hand to help with the photocopier, fax machine, printer and microfilm reader facilities
 - loss of a handsome lofty well-ventilated room with excellent natural light
 - loss of an enquiry desk permanently staffed by 2 experienced dedicated Reference Librarians
 - loss of about three-quarters of freely and easily accessible reference items
- 1.2 The campaign group was of the view that this worsening would be accentuated by the recent price hike in library A4 computer printout costs, which it believed made the Southwark service at 20p one of the most expensive in London.
- 1.3 The campaign group suggested options that might be investigated in terms of alternative interim measures, including the Enable Access Stairclimber - which was stand-alone, needed no installation and came at a price of less than £10,000 – or the Stannah Stairiser CR at a price of about £16,000. The group also suggested that a platform lift could be installed as a better long-term investment for the whole building and claimed that no evidence had been produced to back up Officers' opinion that this would not be a suitable short or long term solution to Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance. The group believed that the cost and closure times outlined by Officers for making the present library DDA compliant had been grossly inflated.
- 1.4 In respect of clarity of aims, the campaign group added that there was no clear timetable or detail for when the reference library would re-open, where the library would be and in what form, and what level of resources, facilities and staffing would be provided. The campaign group asked how the council could spend £500,000 on Dulwich Library and £400,000 to move the Cuming Museum but not commit expenditure for the reference library.
- 1.5 The campaign group drew the committee's attention to the needs of black and ethnic minority school and college students, describing them as the largest user group of the reference library study area and books. These students were more likely to live in over-crowded accommodation with subsequent lack of quiet study space. The reference library provided a safe place for students to study seriously and provided positive role models for young people at risk of social exclusion. At the reference library, younger students worked quietly alongside mature students. The group's view was that the closure of the reference library had a disproportionate effect on this particular group and that this had not been fully acknowledged or addressed in an equality impact assessment.

- 1.6 The campaign group was of the view that modernisation and closure were the real issues behind the proposals for the reference library, not DDA compliance. In summing up, the group believed that ways could be found to make the building DDA compliant and urged the council to fully involve the community in proposals for the future of the library.
- 1.7 In response to questions from members, the campaign group confirmed that material to which there was open access at the library would be reduced to 25% of that previously available. The number of study places would be increased by two, and hours increased by three, but more time would be spent by users in queuing for books. The group also commented that the quality of space, in terms of light and noise, would be reduced and was concerned that a different lay-out would make theft of users' belongings easier. In addition, some users might find it difficult or intimidating to ask for books rather than having free access to browse the shelves.
- 1.8 The campaign group felt that the library was being run down and its stock eroded. The group queried the interim nature and clarity of the council's proposals, asking for any detail of future plans, possible timescales and cost. Some Members were of the view that sufficient resources should be invested in the existing library to keep it going as it was and to make it DDA compliant. Other Members questioned how the library might relate to the whole site and to the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle.
- 1.9 Councillor Lorraine Zuleta, Executive Member for Culture, Leisure & Sport, emphasised that she understood the strong feeling about and attachment to the reference library. She explained that one of the reasons for the change in the approach to looking at use of the two buildings on the site had been the failure of the bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the Discovery Centre. She drew attention to paragraphs 22 to 27 of the report which addressed the impact of the proposals on the community. In the light of officer advice, Councillor Zuleta was of the opinion that the most appropriate decision had been taken.
- 1.10 Members of the committee expressed the view that the DDA required reasonable adjustment to buildings, taking account of resources available, and questioned what this necessitated in the case of the reference library. Members highlighted the reduction in material available and the impact on the quality of the studying space. In addition, they asked for clarity as to the interim nature of the arrangements. Councillor Zuleta explained that the amount of money quoted to install a platform lift reflected the fact that the building was listed. She clarified that Officers were proposing that within the next 6 months options be considered for the whole site. Options would then be put out for consultation before firm recommendations for the future were agreed. Councillor Zuleta estimated that it would take a year to agree a clear vision for the future of the site, including the building which contained the library.

- 1.11 The Library Service Manager and the Health & Safety Adviser, Environment & Housing, advised the committee that a stair riser or climber were not viable options for the library. The Strategic Director of Environment & Housing stressed the objective of meeting all accessibility needs. Representatives of the campaign group felt that not all possibilities had been investigated. The Head of Southwark Building & Design Service emphasised that the building was listed and also that it had only one stair-case for public use, including as a means of escape. Any installation could not disturb the fabric of the building or impinge on the stairway.
- 1.12 The Head of Southwark Building & Design Service further explained that the cost of the option of a platform lift reflected provision of a lift to the reference library and Cuming Museum, including an area for pram storage, an accessible toilet and dry rot and other treatments. In addition, the site was landlocked which made contractor access difficult and increased costs. An alternative option of siting a lift in the middle of the building would be less costly but more disruptive and necessitate the library closing for the entire period of construction work. The Library Service Manager added that a detailed assessment had been made of the possibility of installing a platform lift, including site visits to Dulwich and Newington libraries, details of which had been set to the campaign group.
- 1.13 Councillor Kirsty McNeil questioned the need to spend £100K immediately, bearing in mind that this would only be an interim measure prior to consultation on long-term options. The Strategic Director of Environment & Housing stressed the council's duty to look at all its buildings and make them accessible. Councillor Zuleta commented that, if it involved a long procurement process, the period before final recommendations were completed could be protracted; it was necessary to carry out interim options.
- 1.14 Members asked whether the short-term option of retaining a dedicated reading room upstairs at the library had been considered. Councillor Zuleta responded that officers had advised that this was not possible as the room would have to be staffed, particularly in view of increased dangers of theft, and would also be providing a differential service. The Library Service Manager also stated that there were other issues that needed to be addressed in terms of DDA compliance, such as organising the space in the reference room and taking account of two sets of doors into the library.
- 1.15 Some Members remained concerned that the original decision did not make the future timescale clear and asked that the decision be amended to specify the period for considering options, consequent consultation and final recommendations. The Strategic Director of Environment & Housing clarified that the interim measure was to relocate the library downstairs, in order to improve the service offer and comply with the DDA. In the long-term the council would be looking at the site as a whole and at the role it played in the area. The Legal Services representative gave procedural advice on the options open to the committee.
- 1.16 In response to further questions, the Strategic Director of Environment & Housing explained that the site was to be looked at in the context of the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle. A recent bid submitted by the council to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a discovery centre had been unsuccessful but the council would be submitting an amended bid possibly incorporating the whole site.

- RESOLVED:**
1. That the decisions of the Executive Member for Culture, Leisure & Sport on April 4 2007 in respect of the Relocation of Newington Reference Library not be referred back. The decisions of the Executive Member can therefore be implemented with immediate effect.
 2. That the decision to take short-term action to make the Newington Reference Library DDA compliant be welcomed, together with the expansion of the number of workstations and desk spaces and the extension of the opening hours.
 3. That the work to investigate options for the future of the library be noted and it be hoped that this building will form the basis of the new state-of-the-art library for the regenerated Elephant.
 4. That the Strategic Director of Environment & Housing report back to the committee's September meeting on the consultation process for the future of the whole site and the proposals for community engagement.

(Note: Councillors Fiona Colley, John Friary, Barrie Hargrove and Dominic Thorncroft requested that their votes against the above resolution be recorded.)

The meeting concluded at 7:50 p.m.

CHAIR:

DATED: