

Wickham Bishops Parish Council

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Winner Best Kept Village 2009, 2015
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www.wickhambishopsparishcouncil.org

Parish Clerk

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By email and post

The Rt. Hon. Priti Patel MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

18th March 2019

Dear Ms. Patel,

Re: Wickham Bishops Library

Thank you for your letter of the 15th February which included David Finch's reply to your letter to him. The Parish Council is grateful for your support and encouragement as it tries to save the village library and ensure its continued role as a 'community hub' within Wickham Bishops. Having seen both public houses converted to other uses within the past two years, the library is the last building in the village that can truly be said to be public space, as the village hall is privately owned and not all residents are comfortable with meeting in Church premises.

The Parish Council has established an informal working group comprising three Parish Councillors and four residents, to plan a way forward and to put pressure on ECC to keep the library open or, if it abandons that duty, to allow the parish to acquire the building for community use. These aims have the support of many residents who use the library or would like to see its facilities extended.

The Parish Council has made a Group Response to the consultation survey recently conducted by ECC. The text of its written answers is attached. The team has researched the ownership of the building and, whilst agreeing that it was bought from the Church by ECC in 1972, is yet to discover who owned the land prior to 1850 when the former school was built and whether there are any covenants in place as to the use of the land.

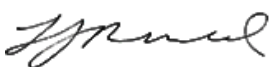
Residents have been invited to suggest ideas for possible future use in addition to maintaining the library service, and to volunteer to support the project as it takes shape. There have been many ideas for additional activities that the community hub could be used for, including supported

computer and internet access (older people say that it's the support that matters as much as the actual equipment), small group meetings such as a 'Scrabble' club, History Group, Reading Group, Children's Story Time and Toy Exchange, possible rehearsal room for non-amplified musical instruments, a mobile bank, relocation of the village doctor's surgery and a venue for the WEA to hold talks and meetings. A list of volunteers has been compiled and the group is engaging with more, both for general assistance and for specialised tasks such as legal and building maintenance work. All of these activities could co-exist with the current library service.

Should ECC not be persuaded to continue the library service that it has successfully provided in this building for the past 40 years, the Parish Council would be particularly anxious to protect the building for use as a community hub, preferably by outright purchase or, failing that, by a long-term lease at a nominal rent. My Council is preparing a business plan but is greatly hampered by not knowing the potential costs involved in obtaining the building. Please would you use your influence with David Finch (Leader ECC) to give maximum opportunity for my Council to acquire the existing building, ideally outright rather than via lease? In particular, a 'sale by tender' would present grave difficulties as the Parish Council would have to raise an unknown amount. There is likely to be considerable interest from speculative developers and ECC should be pressured into putting the community interest ahead of their own financial gain.

Wickham Bishops Library serves as a central point of contact in this rural area for many residents, especially the elderly and families with young children, and the group suspects that without it, additional care costs may result from enforced social isolation. My Council believes this is an opportunity to enhance a facility that is already of great value to residents of Wickham Bishops and neighbouring parishes, and to secure its future for many years to come. Wickham Bishops Parish Council is most grateful for your support in its efforts.

Yours sincerely,



Mrs Liane J Rowland
Parish Clerk & Responsible Financial Officer
Wickham Bishops Parish Council

Attachment: Response to Consultation and Eol Submission

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION AND EOI SUBMISSION

Q3 Why does your organisation/community group think a library service is needed in this area?

We have had a significant volume of feedback from parishioners across the village who are passionate about keeping the library service open. Two examples would be from the weekly young mother and toddler group and from the school teachers who run a 'Summer Big Read' initiative for local 5-11 year olds which they feel makes a huge impact on local educational needs. Representatives from the elderly community say that they cannot travel easily and some do not have their own computers so the library is a life-line for them.

Q5 What type of service is your organisation/community group interested in offering as the alternative library provision?

We are interested in running the library from the current premises. We would welcome the continuation of any book provision, broadband, training and financial support.

Q6 What resources does your organisation/community group have to run an alternative local library provision?

We have detailed feedback that many parishioners would provide volunteer support to continue running the library services from the current premises.

Q7 What initial support would you like from ECC?

Training of volunteers. Grants to improve any facilities. Initial book and PC's as in situ.

Q8 Is there any other information that you would like to give at this stage?

We are preparing a business plan and would welcome the opportunity to present this during the consultation phase.

Q9. Are there any other criteria that you think we should use to assess need?

1. The whole Survey is a very "blunt" instrument that uses District level data rather than local parish data and ignores the Local Needs assessment, producing a result that is skewed against rural libraries which are often key to more isolated communities.
2. The Wickham Bishops library is at the "heart of our community" providing a meeting point for new parents, the very young and old to read and use internet services and to meet to discuss and share issues. We are told by many local elderly parishioners that the library building provides them with a scarce opportunity for social interaction.
3. There is no alternative library within 2 miles.
4. Transportation links do not seem to have been considered which should be a key factor in assessing the issues relating to relatively isolated villages.

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5. Wickham Bishops is a rural village, much like an island such as Mersea, and this needs to be factored in to the assessment. Many old and young simply cannot travel easily to alternatives.
 6. Specific comments on the criterion used and weighting of category:
 - a. Location – If the footfall measure is then set against the population at a district level this is essentially double counting in favour of densely populated areas and against less populated villages.
 - b. Usage – It is unclear if PC usage has been considered. Instead there is a count for book renewals and wifi usage. Many older parishioners don't use wifi but do use the PC's as a life line. In the summer many local school children do research projects and attend improvement reading schemes 'the Big Summer Read' during the summer holidays – over 300 children (ages 6-11) have gone through this system in the past 10 years and teachers quote the essential benefits in the learning levels on returning to school. Also projects for local playgroup children are held throughout the year. None of these factors have been taken into account in considering the needs of the Wickham Bishops library services.
 - c. Population – This is assessed at District level and not the population that are within the library catchment area. There is no reference made here to the Needs Assessment of each community. Rural Communities are disadvantaged by this evaluation which gives misleading results that don't reflect the needs of rural villages in general.
 - d. Deprivation – Is there any evidence of a proven link between deprivation and library usage, because if not then the selection of it as a criterion distort the assessment of need?
 - e. Social Isolation – reference to new parents (i.e. the very young) and those over 65. This should be based on the catchment area and actual usage. The libraries have records of the actual members so more accurate data could have been used. Instead the data at a district level is used. Only 5% weighting is given to this most key aspect. The result is that for a village like Wickham Bishops which is isolated with a higher proportion of very young and old people the statistics are not reflective of the facts and the criterion is not given enough weight
 7. ECC own statistics in the 1028 needs assessment showed that 71% of Wickham Bishops library users are under the age of 19, or over 60. The same figure for Maldon is 62%.

Q19. Would you like to add anything else about the Council's proposals that has not been covered above? Please give us any other ideas that you may have for improving the service or reducing the cost of the service

We would suggest that there are other ways to reduce ECC costs for running the library service and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss these further. We believe that the library service in Wickham Bishops is essential for our community servicing in particular young parents, children and the elderly.

Wickham Bishops Parish Council is strongly opposed to the proposed closure of Wickham Bishops library and urges Essex County Council to retain this vital service in its current form.

Transfer the buildings at a peppercorn rent to another organization who will pay the running costs

We consider that the offer suggested in Q14 (To what extent do you agree with the proposal to invite community groups or other organisations to run 19 libraries in tier 3 locations, to maximize the number of libraries remaining?) should also be extended to tier 4 libraries.

Q22. If you answered yes to Q21, how would it impact your organisation or the people it serves?

If the library service was withdrawn it would impact on the young parents, children and the elderly that use the library services and the library building as a key meeting place in the village.

We also changed all the answers at Q17 from 'Not interested' to 'Not used but aware of'