

Library Working Group

Minutes of 27th March 2019 meeting held at Ballards at 7.30pm

Present: Peter Bates (Chair), Henry Bass, Gerard Harvey, Karl Jarvis and David Pearl

Apologies: Liz McCarthy and Danielle Whittle

1. Summary Notes of 17th March meeting

KJ's record note of the previous Working Group meeting was reviewed and confirmed by those present. KJ/PB advised that, to spread the workload, DP had agreed to produce minutes of subsequent meetings.

The Parish Clerk's advice, that councillors' email communications relating to the Library Working Group activities should be from their @wickhambishopsparishcouncil.org addresses and that letters written on behalf of the Council should be sent through the Clerk, was noted.

2. Action Points

The Working Group briefly reviewed progress against the list of Action Points arising from prior meetings. Fuller reporting against each item was to be covered during the agenda items that followed.

3. Ownership work-stream update

3.1 Although the available conveyancing and title documents appeared to confirm ECC's ownership of the site, there remained some ambiguity as detailed in the notes of the 17th March meeting. HB is continuing his research, in particular to determine whether the land was originally gifted "to the village" and therefore had not necessarily been in the unrestricted ownership of the Chelmsford Diocesan Board. **(Action: HB)**

3.2 KJ reported that the Clerk was making enquiries about the application process for "Public Works Loan Board" (PWLB) and other possible funding routes. *[N.B. Subsequent to the meeting the Clerk has produced a detailed note on the PWLB process and identified other potential funding sources, including the National Lottery].* The possibility of funding support from the Little Braxted Trust was also considered, and the Clerk would be asked to enquire. **(Action: KJ)**

4. Library Services work-stream

4.1 KJ reported that ECC had responded to the Parish Council's "Expression of Interest" (EOI) in "establishing community library services" in Wickham Bishops. At this stage ECC's response simply acknowledges receipt of the EOI and provides general notes on the process and timing going forward. EOIs are required prior to 18th June 2019 but fuller proposals (i.e. a business plan submission) would only be required in the Summer of 2019 if, at that time, the ECC cabinet approves a final strategy that includes closing Wickham Bishops library.

4.2 A letter to Councillor Barker had been drafted. It expressed the Parish Council's primary goal of retaining the library within the ambit of Essex Library Services whilst indicating that, at an

appropriate time, the WBPC Library Working Group would be available to meet with her to explore future opportunities for greater community involvement. It was agreed that the draft should be provided to the Clerk for confirmation and dispatch. **(Action: PB)**

4.3 Letters of Support

- 4.3.1 *Maldon District Council.* HB confirmed that Sue Green (Manager Customer Services) at MDC had emailed him expressing support for the Library. She had stated that “Any initiative to reduce social isolation will be supported”. It was agreed that it would be helpful to have these observations in a hard copy letter. **(Action HB)**
- 4.3.2 *Other Parishes.* A letter of support from the Little Braxted Parish Clerk (Gordon Mussett) had been received. It was reported that Councillor MacGregor is following up with Great Totham Parish Council.
- 4.3.3 *Priti Patel.* The letter sent by the Clerk to Priti Patel on 18th March had been received by her office but as yet there had been no response. It was understood that our MP may be seeking a suitable candidate library to be a pilot case in pursuing the argument for the retention of libraries in her constituency. The Working Group consider Wickham Bishops to be an ideal choice. It was agreed that it would be helpful if Ms Patel would also agree to meet with the Working Group once the period of local election purdah was over. **(Action: HB to follow-up)**

4.4 Business Plan and Financials

The Working Group agreed that the skeleton business plan prepared by KJ should continue to be developed in preparation for potential submission in the Summer should the ECC Cabinet not be persuaded to amend its strategy and retain a public service library in Wickham Bishops. In the meantime no details of the draft business plan should be disclosed to ECC.

- 4.4.1 *Volunteer Register.* DW has started populating a register with names of individuals who might be able to help staff a community library and other community led activities in the building. PB has included an item in the latest Parish Magazine also calling for volunteers. Appeals made through social media (e.g. Facebook) were felt to be very productive where immediate help was required, but perhaps less so for more distant ‘slow burn’ prospects. It was therefore concluded that an appeal for volunteers through that route would be best deferred until the responses so generated could be put to prompt use.
- 4.4.2 *Service Offering.* GH shared an initial list of potential community uses which the library building could accommodate, i.e. in addition to providing a library service. These included meetings of clubs and societies that would not be able, or willing, to use the meeting spaces in the Village Hall or Church Hall. Both of those venues had confirmed that they could not provide facilities to accommodate a library. The Working Group was clear that it would not seek to establish activities which duplicated any that were currently housed within either the Village or Church halls. Additional ideas, including a Scrabble club, will be added to the proposals list being developed. **(Action: GH)**

4.4.3 *Other Updates.*

The Working Group reviewed other individual elements of the Business Plan. It was agreed that the SWOT analysis should include both car parking and the lease on the air raid shelter under Strengths and the need for building improvements under weaknesses.

HB reported that he had secured permission from ECC's Estates Department (Chris Bandy) to have access to the building to conduct a preliminary survey of the building. Through KJ it had been arranged that, without cost at this stage, a chartered surveyor (Mr Lawrence Black) would kindly inspect the library on Saturday 30th March in the presence of HB and PB. *[Subsequently this inspection occurred as planned. DP was also present. Mr Black will provide a report to KJ. He was very positive about the overall condition of the building and the prospects for its continued use in future]* Now that HB had established a contact in the relevant ECC Department, he considered there was a possibility of obtaining more useful details about the building (e.g. its maintenance schedule, connections to utilities etc) from ECC without needing to use the FOI route. **(Action: HB)**

In developing the financial schedules it was agreed that advice would be sought from the Clerk as to the extent the Parish precept would need to be increased if annual running costs were to be met by the Council. *[Subsequently the Parish Clerk has advised that a £10k increase in the Precept would be equivalent to an additional £10.06 per annum for a Band D property.]*

It was also agreed that the Business Plan should include a Contingency Plan addressing the possibility that Community operation of the site failed in future, e.g. if volunteers became unavailable. **(Action: All to contribute, KJ to co-ordinate)**

It was agreed that the Business Plan was currently insufficiently developed to be shared beyond the Working Group but that it should be ready to bring to the Parish Council's June 4th meeting as a 'Business Sensitive' item.

4.5 Other Approaches

Other Libraries. The Parish Clerks for Hatfield Peverel and Danbury would be contacted to ascertain their Council's response to the threat of library closures in their village. **(Action: HB)**

SOLE. It was noted that the pressure group Save Our Libraries Essex had produced a guidance note for Parish Councils. HB advised that petitions and demonstrations were generally of limited value in convincing Councils to amend their intentions.

5. Parish Magazine/Posters

PB confirmed that the work of the Parish Council in attempting to secure the future of the library again featured in the Parish magazine (see Item 4.4.1 above).

DP referred to the possibility of placing banners (such as 'Save the Library') in visible locations near the library. The walls of the air-raid shelter might be an option, given that ECC will not allow anything to be attached to the library fencing, *(Subsequently PB confirmed that the terms of the*

Parish Council's lease prevent such a use without ECC's permission. This would almost certainly be "reasonably withheld"]

6. Decisions for WBPC's next meeting

PB will provide a summary report to the next Parish Council Meeting on April 2nd. It is hoped that the full Council will continue to endorse the activities of the Working Group. No specific decisions will be sought.

7. Any Other Business

It was proposed that, during the Surveyor's visit on 30th March, the librarian on duty would be asked the current cost of hiring the library. This information could be of help when considering its future use by clubs/societies. **(Action: HB/PB)**

It was suggested that some potential uses of the library building (e.g. new clubs) could be encouraged to commence sooner rather than later. **(Action: GH to review possibilities with DW)**

HB noted that, if or when, raising funds to retain the library for the village became necessary the library building itself would be a suitable venue for a fundraising event.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Working Group will be 10am on Sunday 14th April at Ballards.