



Friends of Church Stretton Library

Supporting the library in the heart of the community

Shropshire Council Library Consultation

We welcome the launch by Shropshire Council of a new consultation exercise on the future of libraries in the County.

This is our response on behalf of the Friends of Church Stretton Library group.

Summary

- 1) We are concerned that the lack of publicity about the public consultation will mean people taking part in the consultation will be mainly from Tier 1 Library users.
- 2) We do not think the previous strategy of Tier 2 Libraries being outsourced and fully funded by local communities within a 5 year period was viable.
- 3) We have concerns about the inequities produced by a strategy in which libraries in the largest (Tier 1) towns continue to be fully funded by Shropshire Council through council taxes collected from across Shropshire, while smaller towns are expected to fund their Tier 2 Libraries through an additional local council tax.
- 4) We welcome Shropshire Council **moving towards a partnership approach** to engage community and other local players in supporting the running of local library services, rather than going through formal tendering exercises.
- 5) We advocate a more flexible approach that supports local communities in library fundraising activities, and is responsive to the fundraising capacities of, and pressures on, different places and populations.
- 6) Friends of Library groups can help local communities develop imaginative strategies for securing the future of libraries as the hub of communities; and as offering resources that enhance the well-being and cultural richness of the areas they serve.
- 7) We recommend the setting up of a network of Friends of Library groups so that representatives from different groups can meet, learn from each others' experiences, and support individuals wanting to start a new Friends group in their local community.



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Public Consultation

We have concerns about the sparse publicity about this consultation, with face to face sessions only taking place in Tier 1 Libraries. There appears to be a general lack of awareness – among town councillors, community organisations and library users - that a new consultation is taking place.

There has been scant publicity in the local press. As a Friends of Library group we are disappointed that Shropshire Library Service did not notify us of this consultation, despite the fact the online documentation for this consultation says they want to hear from Friends of Library groups.

We are concerned that this lack of publicity & communication will mean the sample of people responding to the public consultation will be mainly Tier 1 Library users.

Previous Library Strategy

It is two years since Shropshire Council approved a library strategy for 2018 to 2023. We welcomed the vision in this strategy for libraries to be at the core of their communities and Shropshire Council's mission to work in partnership with others to provide library services that inspire people's learning and enjoyment.

However, we had concerns around the viability of Tier 2 Libraries regarding:

- being hosted and managed by local community organisations within contract arrangements with Shropshire Council.
- being fully funded by local communities within a 5 year period.

Our experience suggests that the 2018 strategy of attempting to outsource the hosting and management of Tier 2 Libraries is neither practical nor feasible. In October 2017 a formal procurement process was begun to find a local community organisation to manage the library in Church Stretton.

Church Stretton Library Support Group had expressed interest in helping to run the library, but, as a small community organisation, found this procurement process overly cumbersome, and it stretched our limited resources excessively.

The procurement process is designed to ensure fair dealing between commercial bidders and public commissioners. However, the requirements of confidentiality and impartiality meant Church Stretton Library Support Group could not meet with Shropshire Library Services or the Town Council to discuss our proposal. This prevented us exploring how we could best work together in partnership with each other.



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The rules of confidentiality also meant we could not work engage the wider community during an extremely long period of embargo, creating uncertainty among our supporters, library users, staff and local stakeholders.

Requirements of the procurement process included the bidder taking on the employment of library staff through T.U.P.E and taking on the financial responsibility for covering long term sickness, maternity leave and future redundancies.

Being a small local community organisation Church Stretton Library Support Group could not take on the financial risk associated with employing library staff.

Not surprisingly the procurement process failed to find a viable bid.

Moving towards a partnership approach

Since early 2019 there has been evidence of a stronger approach to partnership working rather than contracting, and we welcome this approach.

In January 2019, Shropshire Council agreed to continue to manage the library in Church Stretton, retaining existing staff, with financial support being expected from both the Town Council and the local community. This model is already in place at Pontesbury where the local parish councils and Friends of Pontesbury Library group help contribute towards the running costs of Pontesbury library

We welcomed this approach, believing it to be much more practical and viable. We were told by Shropshire Library service at a meeting in January 2019, that the Town Council and ourselves would meet with them shortly to take this forward and explore how we will work together.

Church Stretton Library Support Group went ahead and set up a new charity called Friends of Church Stretton Library with the approval of Shropshire Library Services.

Since January 2019 we have established and registered a new charity: **Friends of Church Stretton Library. We aim to:**

- Proactively encourage the local community to make use of library facilities
- Raise funds to support and enhance the work of the library
- Run a programme of activities supporting lifelong learning, culture and promoting health and social well-being
- Provide volunteers to support - but not replace - library staff, and enhance the work of the library
- Act as a link between the Church Stretton Library Service and the wider community
- Work in collaboration with other local groups and organisations to support a coordinated approach



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- Encourage involvement of local community in all we do, without distinction of gender, sexual orientation, race, disability, religion or political opinions

Over this short period of time we have:

- Recruited new Trustees to broaden our skills profile and be able to offer a wider range of events and activities
- Built an active group of volunteers and supporters
- Planned and delivered a range of cultural, leisure and educational events: music, drama, local history, quiz evening
- Raised approx. £5,000 through events and donations, with some local residents now paying regular donations through standing orders. This money has been used to support library events and activities, enhance the library service through small purchases, and to build a robust base for supporting the running of Church Stretton Library in the future
- Worked more closely with and provided volunteers to support library staff e.g. Summer holiday events for children, on line help week, visitor information centre during summer peak times.

These demonstrate the value of collaboration between a professionally run library, and an active Friends group. They also show ways in which local engagement can help secure the future development of the library service and foster new generations of active users.

However, we are concerned that the promised three-way meeting between Shropshire Library service, the Town council and Friends of Church Stretton Library has still not taken place. Effective partnership working requires the different parties to learn about and understand each other's perspectives, build trust in each other and work together to find solutions that will work.

Towards a new strategy

We strongly support the Vision and Mission statements of Shropshire Council for the library service, and, as a Friends Group, seek to work towards the achievements of the four Outcomes set out in the 2018 strategy

However, we hope that Shropshire Council might revisit the following aspects of the previous strategy.

1. A partnership approach

We have found since the end of the formal process we have been able to develop more productive relationships with Shropshire Library Services, the Town Council, and other partners. We therefore recommend **a partnership approach** rather than



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formal tendering exercises in future attempts to engage community and other local players in supporting the running of library services.

We believe this is a more sensible approach for managing Tier 2 Libraries as:

- Only small community groups are likely to want to operate Tier 2 Libraries as there is no profit to be made. These groups will be too small to take on employing staff, running a payroll and managing pensions.
- At present, librarians are brought in from other Shropshire libraries to provide cover for staff absences. Without this type of arrangement, Tier 2 Libraries might not be able to open if a staff member is absent because of sickness.
- Shropshire Council can be involved in recruiting new staff, making sure only suitable people are appointed and that they work to Shropshire Council standards.
- Librarians need to be kept up to date and being under one employer is more conducive to their learning through networking and shared training events.
- As libraries are often open only a few days a week, librarians can be based in more than one library. It is much easier to coordinate if they have one employer than two different employers.
- Formal procurement exercises are extremely time-consuming for all concerned, including employees of Shropshire Council.

2. Funding and staffing

The 2018 strategy states that Shropshire Council want to make Tier 2 Libraries cost neutral by 2023/24. We have always had concerns about the inequities produced by a strategy in which libraries in the largest (Tier 1) towns would continue to be fully funded by Shropshire Council though council tax income collected from across Shropshire, with smaller towns being expected to pay **again** for their Tier 2 Libraries from an additional local council tax. Meanwhile residents of surrounding parishes use Tier 2 Libraries but pay a much lower precept and are not expected to contribute to its cost. Despite contributing more financially, residents would also face potential reductions in staffing and opening hours. In addition, these smaller towns also faced the prospect of having to take on the funding of leisure services, youth services, street lighting and other services.

We have always believed it unrealistic to expect Tier 2 Libraries to be fully self funded after 5 years.

As a Friends Group, we anticipate supporting our local library through fundraising activities, and have already begun to develop appropriate strategies. But we strongly wish to do so in partnership with, rather than as a substitute for, public funding from Shropshire Council.



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We therefore advocate a more flexible approach that supports local communities in fundraising activities, and is responsive to the fundraising capacities of, and pressures on, different places and populations. Such an approach would be intrinsic to the partnership strategy proposed above, and in line with wider 'place making' orientation of local government.

It also suggests a need to revisit the rigid distinctions between libraries in different Tiers, so that the additional costs to library users is spread more fairly across the county.

3. Library materials and resources.

Figures taken from Shropshire Council's 2018 library strategy show that over the previous 5 years there had been a decrease in the number of visits, book loans and requests. However, there has been an increase in the number of people attending events and making enquiries to library staff.

In the future there is likely to be an increase in the use of Shropshire Council's e-books and e-magazines service. We cannot be certain though how much this trend from books to eBooks will continue. In April 2018 the Publishers Association Annual Handbook showed that for the period from 2014 to 2018 there had been an 8.4% increase in physical sales in the UK and only a 1.8 % increase in digital sales.

We welcome these new digital offerings, but do not see them replacing the need for a positive approach to updating and reinvigorating other forms of library materials.

Some community libraries report a substantial increase in the number of people using the library after initiatives asking the community about the types of books they want to see at the library and improving book rotation. We would like to pilot this approach at Church Stretton and, if successful, open out to other libraries in cooperation with Shropshire Library Service.

4. Access to and use of information

Provision of library internet access has become even more crucial for those who do not have access at home, particularly given the increasing reliance on web-based access to government and local government services. We anticipate that library staff, supported by volunteers will continue to provide advice relating to use of computers and the internet. However, a more positive approach might be considered to ensure that vulnerable groups are not digitally disenfranchised, and to raise the quality of digital literacy across the County.

Libraries will continue to have an important role in providing information to the local community. This includes information to help people to stay healthy, live with long-term medical conditions and be signposted towards **reliable** information on the



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internet. It also includes education in digital literacy and the evaluation of the reliability of data found on the web. Future strategies might emphasise the importance of working with local groups and organisations to improve access to and assessment of web-based information.

5. Support for 'Friends of' Groups

Setting up a new 'Friends of' Group, including registering as a charity, requires a diverse range of skills and knowledge. We were lucky that there were people living in Church Stretton with the necessary expertise to do this. Members of a local community wanting to set up a new 'Friends of' Group would benefit being able to meet representatives from other such groups to learn from their experiences. 'Friends of' groups could also benefit from hearing about each others' success stories so they could replicate them as well as learning from their mistakes. This network could easily be set up and Friends of Church Stretton Library would be happy to host an initial meeting in Church Stretton.

6. Conclusion. As a Friends Group we see ourselves as having a crucial role in enabling local communities to develop imaginative strategies for securing the future of libraries as the hub of communities; and as offering resources that enhance the well-being and cultural richness of the areas they serve. We hope that the role of such groups is supported and enhanced in future strategy documents.