

Report from the Higham Ferrers Town Council Library Working Party

Annual Town Meeting 21st March 2018

The Town Council agreed to establish a working party of 5 councillors to support the town clerk on this issue. Their brief was to research and carefully consider all options available for the provision of a cost-effective library service.

Building

The building has been valued by NCC at £370,000. This is more than the annual budget of the Town Council for 2018/19 (£365,000). The Town Council has paid for its own valuation and survey on the property. The report shows that the building has been allowed to fall into disrepair over the years, with an approx. cost given of £50,000 to complete repairs including the roof, windows and guttering which all need repair or replacement (copy of part of valuation made available). To purchase the building for £370,000 the Town Council would need to borrow the money over a period of 25 years. Repayments would be approximately £20,000 per year. Therefore, funds are needed to service the loan as well as undertake the repairs. NCC have stated that the annual running costs of the building are £26,435. Another cost which needs to be funded from the council tax. (or a community group raising funds) Note this figure does not include any internal maintenance cost.

An architect has been engaged by the Town Council to assess whether it is feasible to undertake internal alterations to make the building more flexible and improve the facilities such as adding a lift and more toilets.

The building is currently used by other groups – knitter knatter – yoga – etc. However, these groups bring in little or no income to subsidise the cost of running the building.

Library

Usage of the library service nationally has fallen in recent years with the advent of amazon and online books. Higham Ferrers Library is no different and numbers have declined. However other services have been introduced into the building e.g., blue badges, bus passes, adult activities, children's activities. These other services are not included in the current offer from NCC to the community to run the Library.

Since the library service was threatened the options and deadlines have changed several times. On Tuesday 13th March, the cabinet at NCC agreed that Higham Ferrers library will remain open till 31st August, opening at least 3 days per week.

In order to save money, the only option on now offer from NCC is for the community to run an Independently Managed Library which has no financial support or otherwise from NCC.

A formal interest in running the Library will have to be declared by a group or organisation by 31st May This group will have to purchase or lease the building and all operating costs will have to be met by the group. The county council is offering a service level agreement to provide certain infrastructure requirements such as new books, NCC management systems and training. These packages range from £6000 a year for 500 books to £11250 plus one-off costs for training and set up which could equate to approximately £3000.

In addition to property costs and costs of the library system there are staff costs which have been estimated at £41462 by NCC. Although

this could be reduced by using more volunteers, there will still need to be paid staff co-ordinate the volunteers and the building.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing Services operate within the building. Consultation and research has shown that Higham Ferrers residents value this local service highly and is more important than the books. This service will be lost under the proposed transfer of the Library to the Town Council or another group.

The Town Council has not yet been able to identify how this service is funded. It was until recently run by a Community Interest Company but has now been brought back in house to NCC.

The Children's Centre services will continue to run for 3 months we are told and a 12-week consultation is due to begin on the future of the Wellbeing Service on 23rd March.

Cando is a private company, currently renting space at the library from the NCC. It is a company that runs a day centre for the elderly. How this will continue within the building is unknown as the lease is with the NCC not the Town Council.

Overall to purchase the building and run a library will cost in the region of £120,000 per year. The Town Council have included £60,000 in the budget for 2019/20 towards the service, but a further increase would probably be needed for 2019-2020. This could be as much as approx. 30% or approx. £42 per year (a copy of the budget is available).

The building has an income of approx. £8278 per year, this is mainly from CANDO.

It is possible for a community group to purchase and run the Library. However, as far as we are aware no community group has come forward.

This information could change over the next few weeks, now that the report from the Government Inspector has been published and with the advent of the new financial year on 1st April.

The Town Council has today been informed of a complaint to the government department stating that the proposed library closure is not meeting with NCC statutory requirements, currently all timetables will remain the same whilst the complaint is investigated.

Cllr Barry Prigmore

Chairman of the Working Party.