



MANNINGTREE TOWN COUNCIL

DRAFT MINUTES

Minutes of the Joint Public Meeting between Manningtree Town Council, Lawford Parish Council and Mistley Parish Council to discuss Manningtree Library held in the Ball Room, Foundry Court, Manningtree on Friday 18th January, 2019 at 6.30 p.m.

In attendance: County Cllr. C. Guglielmi
District Cllr. A. Coley
District Cllr. A. Baker
District Cllr. and Chairman of Lawford Parish Council, V. Guglielmi
Mayor of Manningtree Town Council, R. Stocks
Chairman of Mistley Parish Council, M. Rayner
Councillors from Manningtree Town Council, Lawford Parish Council and Mistley Parish Council
Approximately 102 members of the public
Mrs. L. Djuve-Wood (Clerk to Manningtree Town Council)

1. Introduction by Chairman Ruth Stocks

Manningtree Town Cllr. and Mayor R. Stocks welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that this was a joint public meeting between Manningtree Town Council, Mistley Parish Council and Lawford Parish Council. She then said that there would be an update from County Cllr. C. Guglielmi prior to the public participation session where members of the public would be able to make their views heard. This would be followed by a joint discussion between the three parishes regarding the Library Strategy Consultation. She emphasised the importance of members of the public responding to the online Library Strategy Consultation and referred to a leaflet produced by ECC with all the details.

2. Update from County Councillor Carlo Guglielmi

County Cllr. C. Guglielmi thanked everyone for coming along to the meeting. He explained that the Library Strategy Consultation is being undertaken to understand what the current usage of the library is. The figures that the County Council have collected show that there has been a huge drop in usage of the library and the building as it stands thus becomes unsustainable. He went on to explain that the purpose of the meeting was to find a good use of the building in order to safeguard some form of library service, should Manningtree Library still be classified as a tier 3 library after the consultation period. He stated that it is no secret that this is a drive to cut costs. All local authorities have had their funding reduced massively from central government since 2010. The County Council has found £700m worth of savings with another £176m needed to be identified.

He explained that it is down to the community as a whole to see what can be done collectively to secure the library and the building. He said that it is very apparent that the building cannot be kept in its current shape or form by the County Council and that if the library was to be run as a community library then there are conversations to be had with the County Council around whether the building is transferred to the community or whether it is leased or rented. He asked members of the public what their thoughts were on the matter and added that the one thing in the community's favour is the fact that the building is listed, it's a huge building and it is not going to be very easy to market it. He said he was very keen to safeguard some kind of library service, but that a sustainable plan is needed to enable us to do that. He then handed over to members of the public.

3. Public Participation Session

Some members of the public stated that while they agree that things have got to change, we are turning ourselves back to the 19th century to a certain degree by offering a third-class library service despite still paying the same amount of council tax. Questions were asked about how Essex County Council can spend £210k in the last few years, including £25k just on the self-service machines two years ago, just to throw it all away. It was noted that the stated running costs are £18k a year without staff and questions were asked as to whether the parish councils would want to spend that amount of money.

There were concerns about the fact that there are individuals who have trained to become professional

librarians and that volunteers will not have those same skills. There were also concerns about the potentially large number of new residents moving into the area in the not so distant future and that there is in fact going to be an increased need for people to use the library services. In addition, it was pointed out that the people who are at the poorest end of the community will still need to be able to access computers in order to sign on and to look for jobs. In order to do that they will need library services that can offer computers and Wifi and some people may also need professionals who can help them use the IT equipment.

A member of the public stated that they were confused about the purpose of the meeting as they thought they were here to talk about what the parish councils were doing to try and stop the library being closed, but that it seemed the meeting was more to do with ways of keeping the library open. Several people were concerned that running Manningtree Library as a community tier three library was already a fait accompli despite the consultation not having ended yet.

Questions were asked as to how big the current library building is, whether there are other rooms that are underused and whether there are options to move to a different building. It was stated that whereas the building is a beautiful building it is not so practical in terms of the big steps at the front and disabled access.

Lawford Parish Cllr. and former Library Manager J. Langstone answered that there are two rooms at the back. One's got the museum and the other one is the staff room. There is no way to alter the front of the building. They've tried going in from the side but the post office won't move the telephone box. There's only one toilet, no disabled toilet, no kitchen facilities, but otherwise, the building looks big, it has a beautiful ceiling which is covered up by the false ceiling to keep the heat in, but it's a very difficult building to run things in in that respect.

County Cllr. C. Guglielmi said that he had given that some consideration and that you'd need to put some form of mezzanine floor in which could make the building more sustainable in terms of usage and income. He added that on the recent library drop-in day several ideas came up, such as using it for the Citizens Advice Bureau, space for solicitors, Manningtree Town Council could carry their meetings there and it could perhaps be used as a drop-in point for the police. There are lots of uses that can be identified but the key to unlocking it all is to turn the building into something that can be used commercially.

Members of the public wanted to know why Essex County Council have not thought to invite in more groups to use and hire the library building sooner. They were also wondering how improvements to the library building and the running of a community library may be financed.

County Cllr. C. Guglielmi explained that Essex County Council were looking after the building and that they still do. However, libraries were the last thing to be looked at when looking at cost savings and that for a long time they were hoping to leave libraries alone. He added that through the consultation process ECC will be looking for ideas from the community on how to preserve some form of library service.

In terms of income, County Cllr. C. Guglielmi stated that it could potentially come from commercial businesses. Someone who would be willing to come forward to put money into the building to ensure that it is commercially viable. He added that an option may be a possible transfer of the library building to a parish council and that any of the three parish councils would be good candidates. He said he'd been told that the Museum is also quite willing to expand and become more commercial. It's a matter of finding a good commercial use so that it becomes sustainable.

A member of the public asked if the three parish councils would have to put their precepts up to pay for the running costs should the building be transferred as a community asset and should the parish councils fail to secure commercial funding.

County Cllr. C. Guglielmi replied that there are several options. He said they'd need to go to the public and the private sector to understand what appetite there is to invest. The asset transfer would be to transfer the asset as it is and, whereas there still isn't an answer, it may be possible to have it transferred for no fee. It may be that the parish councils will have to raise the precept but that is a choice that the local community will have to make. If the asset is transferred and if the commercial element is sustainable then there shouldn't be a huge cost to the community.

There were concerns that having a volunteer run library may mean no more than 300 books and no computers, but County Cllr. C. Guglielmi explained that the aim is to preserve the library with the books and with the computers as it is and have the whole lot transferred to the community.

A member of the public said that he believed very few people actually know the history of the acquisition of the building and explained that in 1979 there was a big lobby group called the Amenities Society who fought very hard to acquire the building for public use as it was the only substantial building in the district. They got the building for £14k and managed to get the library authority interested, who bought it and got a 50% grant. He said he would be interested to know if there were any conditions attached to that 50% grant when they got it and where that grant came from. He also added that most of the people who use the library do not live in Manningtree itself, where the precept is very small. He added that it is a listed building and we've got to look after it, we've already lost too many.

A member of the public stated that ECC's measurement of library usage does not take into account the many people coming in and using the library for a whole variety of reasons other than borrowing books. They also added that the consultation form is incredibly complex, and not user-friendly.

County Cllr. C. Guglielmi said that if anyone is finding the form difficult to fill in they should write an e-mail and send it to ECC.

It was pointed out that from an educational point of view the library is extremely important and that in the summer the library runs reading schemes for children during their six-week break. A previous library volunteer added that she'd witnessed the immense number of children who take part in the summer reading challenge every year. A centralised library would be limiting access to learning resources and services for disadvantaged children

It was also noted that Manningtree Library is one of the few libraries that have parking near to the disabled access and that moving the library to a more centralised place would also be affecting our more disadvantaged groups in that aspect.

Questions were also asked as to how proposing to close an asset like a library in the community fits in with the government's agenda of prevention and reducing isolation, which seems like a complete contradiction to government policy.

People also wanted to know what the age proportions of users of the library were and it was pointed out that people between the ages of 15 to 19 years do not tend to use the library very much as the opening hours do not make it very accessible for young people to study there.

A member of the public asked the councillors to provide the public with at least three practical things that each of them could do to ask the county to look at the needs of Manningtree.

County Cllr. C. Guglielmi replied that the consultation online is not the only way to communicate with the County Council and that an e-mail to the cabinet member will be just as good. It was agreed that the Manningtree Town Clerk would collate e-mail and letter responses from members of the public to send to Essex County Council Cabinet Member Susan Barker on their behalf. Manningtree Town Council Mayor R. Stocks explained that the contact details would be put on the town council facebook page and the town council's website.

Mistley Parish Cllr. and Chairman M. Rayner said that there is no proposal to close the library as that would be a tier four classification. He explained that Manningtree Library is at the moment located in tier three which is defined as a location where no library service is needed in order to have a comprehensive and efficient network but where Essex County Council wishes to support the provision of library services run by a community or other partner organisation with ECC support. A tier two classification is defined as library services in areas where there is a need for them, managed by ECC as part of their statutory provision of a comprehensive network and delivered in partnership with the community or other partner. He added that he believed a manageable way forward would be for ECC to take the lead, but with some extra help from volunteers, and emphasised that librarianship is a profession.

He also stated that he agreed with people who had said that the questions in the consultation document were loaded. He added that they talk about catchment areas but they don't talk about age profiles and

about the social impact such a library has. The issue has been mentioned about the elderly and other people who may not have access to a computer. He also mentioned that Tendring District Council is opening up its doors to provide more access to its online services but that you cannot access TDC services unless you go to Clacton and that means getting on a bus which in turn means the carbon footprint goes up. He noted that Manningtree Library has a significant catchment area which needs to be serviced by a library led by ECC and that every effort needs to be made in the initial phases to re-rate it from tier three to tier two.

District Cllr. A. Coley said he agreed with most of the comments made so far and that if there is a way that the County Council can be encouraged to change the classification of the library from a tier three to a tier two then he would support any effort to do that. He added that if that doesn't happen however, there's got to be a plan B, and suggested that whilst every effort is done by everyone through the consultation to get the County Council to change its mind regarding the classification, we also need to look at ways of getting the building into our ownership collectively, decide what we are going to do with it and how we are going to utilize it for the wider community.

He urged everyone to complete the online consultation survey and also send an e-mail or letter to the clerk at Manningtree Town Council as previously discussed. He added that identification of organisations who are currently using the library needs to be assessed that a user profile needs to be developed to ascertain which days of the week the different organisations are currently using the library. He also suggested creating a profile of users who would go to the library if it was open at the appropriate times or available to them when they needed to use it.

Manningtree Town Council Mayor R. Stocks told everyone to e-mail the clerk on clerk@manningtreetowncouncil.org.uk or write to her at PO Box 12651, Manningtree, CO11 9AR. She also said that she'd been asked by Acorn Village to express their concern about the library as their residents use the library a lot. They come down and use the books, they also use the computer system and had asked her to make everyone aware of that.

District Cllr. A. Baker said that his e-mail to the cabinet member is going to be very long and that it will be followed up with a letter to the MP and emphasised the importance of people making their voices heard.

Manningtree Town Cllr and Mayor. R. Stocks ended the public participation session and thanked everyone for their questions.

4. Joint discussion between the three parishes regarding the Essex Library Strategy Consultation and the future of Manningtree Library

This was deferred to allow members of the public to express their views via e-mail or letter to the clerk or to any of the County, District or Parish councillor representatives. Any proposal for a Plan B between the three parishes, in order to be endorsed by the three separate parishes, will need go to each respective town/parish council to be voted on in public in due course.

5. Information for members of the public on the importance of the Essex Library Strategy Consultation and how and where they can submit their response

This information was provided to the participants at the start of the meeting.

6. Summary of agreed actions

It was agreed that members of the public would write to the clerk with their views and usage of the library to allow the three parishes to build a case for the library to be moved from tier three to tier two.

There being no further questions Manningtree Town Cllr. and Mayor R. Stocks thanked all participants for their input and closed the meeting at 8:30 p.m.