

Dear all,

Please see below the statement made at the County Council Cabinet meeting today.

The Cabinet members actually voted on their proposals before I had the chance to make the statement, which I think is a perfect illustration of the dis-respect and contempt with which they have viewed the concerns of the electorate throughout this process.

I am here to speak on behalf of Friends of Gloucestershire Libraries, and on behalf of the now 15,000 people who have signed a county-wide petition calling for an urgent, independent and transparent review of your plans for the library service.

I do not speak on behalf of a 'vocal' or 'eloquent' minority. I speak on behalf of people from all across our county, of all ages, from all walks of life, and from across the political spectrum, who are deeply concerned at the irreparable damage risked by the scale and structuring of these cuts.

We welcome the revisions to the original proposals announced on Monday, but they go nowhere near far enough. We congratulate you on seeing the argument for retaining a public library service in Cinderford. But what about the people of Hesters Way, Matson, Tuffley, Brockworth, Stonehouse and other communities, whose public library service will still be withdrawn or severely reduced?

What about the users of the mobile libraries – a lifeline for many of our county's most vulnerable residents? The proposed replacement – a virtual or catalogue postal system - is no replacement at all for the sense of independence, choice and companionship that can be gained from a mobile library visit, and we would question that the £7.50 per loan figure quoted at the last Council meeting will even be reduced at all, given the high costs of posting the heavy, large print books favoured by many elderly library users, and which, we were assured, the 'vulnerable' will be able to access for free.

The additional payments announced for community libraries are 'one-off', or small yearly amounts, so concerns around the long-term sustainability of these libraries remains unresolved, and there has been no public rebuttal of Councillors' comments that community libraries could in fact charge for membership or loans, casting severe doubt over the future of fair and equitable access to library services.

There has still been no acknowledgement of the disparities between the model of community libraries operating in Buckinghamshire, and that proposed for Gloucestershire, despite this being pointed out many times by voices from both within and outside the county, including the Chair of one-such volunteer-run library himself. The community libraries in Buckinghamshire are in affluent areas, with a retired professional population and the capacity to invest a great deal of time and money. Several of the areas earmarked for 'community transfer' in Gloucestershire do not fit this profile, and we are not satisfied with the level of detail contained in the equality impact assessment published this week. On BBC Radio, Cllr. Hawthorne was pleased to report that there were 12 volunteers willing to start work at one proposed community library. The much-vaunted community libraries in Buckinghamshire operate with a team of 50-60 volunteers. He also said that there were examples of successful volunteer-run libraries 'up and down the country' – I would like to ask him, where?

Gloucestershire's book-fund, even at £1 million a year was one of the lowest of all shire counties. This budget has been cut by a total of £1 million in the last 2 years and will be cut by £600,000 a year from now on. Even with a one-off addition of £100,000, this is woefully insufficient for even those libraries that may remain.

You say that these revisions have shown that you are listening.

Announcing final plans for the service whilst there are still public consultation sessions to be held, and a consultation survey open until the 11th February, is not listening.

Entering into negotiations with 'partners', then refusing to reveal who they are so that local people are forced to 'consult' on proposals they effectively know nothing about, is not listening. We have received countless emails from frustrated members of the public who have left consultation sessions with no real answers, and more confused than when they arrived!

Handing in petitions from your local constituents against library cuts at the last Council meeting, then failing to speak up for your constituents in the debate, is not listening.

Claiming that library cuts will not hurt the most vulnerable, and then ignoring, or sending dismissive responses to letters from members of the public pointing out exactly why this is not the case, is not listening.

Taking your vote on final recommendations before I have even been given the opportunity to present this statement, is not listening.

Given all of this, I am sorry to say that Friends of Gloucestershire Libraries, and the thousands of people across the county who have signed the petition or contacted us in despair, have little confidence in this Council's consultation and decision-making process. The lack of transparency, and clear, accessible information has been, frankly, appalling. We still believe that these proposals may place the Council in breach of the Public Libraries Act, and today, we repeat the petition's call for a review.

We accept that the Council faces a difficult financial situation, and that there may be savings to be made within the libraries budget. What we do not accept, are cuts which risk permanent and irreparable damage to our well-used and widely beneficial public library service. Cuts which will hurt our county's most vulnerable residents the most.

You say that you are listening – please – this is the final chance to prove it.

Thanks to all those who came along - both to the pre-meeting lobby and the meeting itself. It was great to have so much support.

Best wishes,
Demelza