



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

County Councillor Susan Barker
Cabinet Member for Customer and Corporate Services
Essex County Council
County Hall
Market Road
Chelmsford
Essex, CM1 1LX

20 February 2019

PLEASE QUOTE ON CORRESPONDENCE
Our Ref: AJ/Libraries/200219

Dear Susan,

Essex County Council Libraries Consultation 2019

I am writing to you as one of the Essex Members of Parliament whose constituency is affected by your proposed Libraries Consultation. Specifically, while the consultation proposes retaining both Rayleigh and Wickford libraries as full service Tier 1 locations, unfortunately, it also proposes that Hockley library is downgraded to Tier 3 status and Hullbridge library is downgraded to Tier 4 status, which would potentially result in its closure.

I have recently visited both of the libraries in question and held meetings with members of the local community in both locations, with each group being absolutely determined that their library should not close. As the local Member of Parliament, I am writing to you subsequent to these visits and I would be grateful if you would regard this letter as my formal response to your consultation exercise.

Hockley Library

Hockley library, which is located right in the centre of the village (with a convenient car park just behind it) was, as I understand it, only very narrowly placed in Tier 3, apparently having been only just 2 points short of the threshold to achieve Tier 2 status.

The library is highly popular locally and is very well used by the local community. I understand that local residents, led by two young women, Megan Williams and Carla Vaughan, have recently established a petition of some 8,000 signatures (a combination of a physical petition and online) which has recently been delivered to County Hall. The residents feel very strongly that Hockley library should be upgraded to Tier 2 status, not least because of the very valuable role that it plays in the Hockley community (and also the nearby parish of Hawkwell, whose residents look to Hockley for their library services).

As well as the provision of books and other reading material, both physical and electronic, Hockley library plays an extremely valuable role in hosting a number of community groups and organisations.



These include inter alia, a "Knit and Natter" group, which meets twice monthly in the library; a Baby and Toddler group, which meets twice weekly (and is apparently so popular that it is known colloquially as "pram wars" and an Ancestry group, which meets twice monthly. In addition, local District and County Councillors have used the library for constituency surgeries, as apparently have Sanctuary Housing, the major provider of public sector housing in my constituency, who have used the library as a venue to meet with local tenants to discuss various issues relating to their role.

As well as these community groups that meet on a regular basis, the library has often provided an excellent exhibition space, for the work of local artists and historians. Indeed, as part of the 100th anniversary of the end of the Armistice, I attended an exhibition there last November, which had been organised by a local historian, Ms Joan Paparo, who did a superb job of researching each of the names on the Hockley War Memorial at the centre of the village and then of providing notes on every single one of them including, for instance, pictures and details of ships that those in the Royal Navy had served on in WW1.

I think this is a very good example of the value of Hockley library to my constituents in the Hockley/Hawkwel area and of why they are so determined that it should be retained as a Tier 2 facility.

In addition, looking at some of your other key criteria, as I understand it, Essex County Council's position is that even with a reconfigured network, people should not have to travel more than 2 miles to a library, but the distance to the Tier 1 library in Rayleigh is almost 3 miles, which is quite a walk for senior citizens and which is only served by one regular bus service, the Arriva number 8, which itself is potentially subject to further service restrictions under part of the ongoing Essex County Council Bus Services Consultation! (To which I will be replying in due course.)

There has also been a considerable amount of new building in the Hockley and Hawkwel area in the last few years and there are well over 20,000 residents now living in the combined Hockley/Hawkwel area.

Essex County Council claim that usage statistics for Hockley library have gone down in recent years but this must be attributed, at least in part, to restrictions in the hours of opening because, simple logic suggests, that if you restrict the opening hours of the library it may in turn lead to a reduction in footfall. That said, over 900 local residents recently participated in a "book raid" to show very graphically the degree to which the library in Hockley is capable of being used.

Given the combination of all these factors – and what, I can assure you having spoken to them, are the extremely strong feelings of local residents in Hockley, I would be obliged if, as a result of this consultation, you could ensure that Hockley is upgraded from Tier 3 to Tier 2.



Hullbridge Library

Hullbridge library, is currently earmarked under your consultation as Tier 4 i.e. it is slated for closure unless it is possible to find a way of keeping it open, for instance with the use of volunteers. As with Hockley, I have met with local residents, who in this case already have an existing "Friends of Hullbridge Library" (FOHL) group, which I understand was formed approximately 1-2 years ago, at the behest of Essex County Council Libraries.

FOHL have made a number of points with regard to the future of the library, including that it is over 3 miles to get into the nearest Tier 1 library in Rayleigh. It is possible to walk from Hullbridge into Rayleigh but in some parts the condition of the footpath is far from ideal and again, for those without cars, the route is only served by a relatively intermittent bus service.

The demography of Hullbridge is also particularly important here, as it has one of the highest proportions of senior citizens of any community in Essex. This is particularly so, given the large number of mobile home parks, which are based in the north of the village along the River Crouch (as well as The Dome mobile home park, along the Lower Road).

These dwellings are overwhelmingly owned by senior citizens, many of whom rely on Hullbridge library for their community services.

As in Hockley, a number of community groups and organisations use Hullbridge library as a regular meeting place. These include monthly meetings of the University of the 3rd Age (U3A), both Riverside U3A and Hullbridge U3A. The Hullbridge Women's Institute, the Library Book Club, Rhyme Time for young children on Thursday afternoons, a "Knit and Natter" group and in addition a "Construction Club" which allows young children to work with simple building toys and as such to develop important social skills. Again, as with Hockley, Hullbridge library is also a venue for District/County Councillors to hold surgeries for their constituents.

Hullbridge residents have also put together a petition, totalling something like 800 signatures, in defence of their library and the local residents, and the FOHL group, strongly believe that Hullbridge should also be placed into the Tier 2 category. I very much agree with this request.

The Changing Role of Libraries – a Vital Community Resource

On a personal note, when I was studying as a school boy in the 1970s whilst growing up in Laindon, I used my local library as a source of books and also as a quiet place in which to concentrate. Libraries were essentially a place where you could borrow books (and records and tapes at that time, which dates me), and also somewhere where you could work. In the 21st Century, however, their role has evolved considerably and, as amply demonstrated in the number of clubs and societies that use both Hockley and Hullbridge libraries, they now play an extremely important social role within the wider community.



Libraries are a place for local organisations to meet, Councillors to engage with their constituents, people to be provided with help and support and, as such, they play an important role in the “social capital” of communities across Essex. They are also extremely important in helping to combat social isolation. Given this very important expansion in their role, as an MP with 18 years service, I believe it would be a great mistake if Essex County Council were to fail to appreciate the extremely important community and social benefit that are provided by libraries in the modern age. If anything, I would like to see greater investment going into our local libraries, in order to expand this role further.

Legal Issues

I am not a lawyer but, along with other Essex MPs, I received a letter in mid-January from Michel Ellis MP, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

In essence, the letter made very plain that officials and indeed Ministers at DCMS will be monitoring the Essex County Council consultation very closely. As the key paragraph of the letter states:

“You may be aware that Ministers have a statutory duty to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities and secure the proper discharge of the duties conferred on local authorities in England under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 (the Act). We take this duty seriously and I want to emphasise that should my Department receive a complaint that ECC may be failing to meet its duty following a final decision taken by ECC about its library service, we will challenge ECC and carefully consider the evidence before deciding if a local enquiry is needed.”

In other words, if Essex County Council do decide to proceed with this course of action and someone complains (be they an MP, Councillor, or local resident) then it is by no means impossible that DCMS will launch a local enquiry into the County Council’s proposed actions.

My instinct is that it would be advisable to wait and see Essex County Council’s response to the consultation exercise before deciding whether to try and go down this route but, nevertheless, I think it is very important that all parties concerned – not least Essex County Council – should clearly understand that this avenue is potentially available.

Financial Implications

I am very conscious that local authorities, including Essex County Council, have had to go through a period of considerable financial stringency in the last few years. Across the country, Councillors of all political colours and none, have had to take sometimes very difficult decisions in recent years, in order to try and balance the books and to continue to provide local services at a price which their residents can realistically afford to pay.



That said, in broad terms, Essex County Council would save around about £1 million a year if they were to close the 25 libraries which have been identified under Tier 4. To my mind, this would be a false economy, not least because of the extremely important social role that libraries now provide in our communities (as I have argued above).

In addition, while I think it is right that the County Council should budget prudently for the future, it is my understanding that, at present, Essex County Council possess something in the order of £250 million in reserves. While I am told that some of this money has been earmarked to cover potential costs of individual projects – such as a lengthy court case relating to issues surrounding the allegedly defective Waste Treatment Works at Courtauld Road in Basildon – nevertheless, it seems to me utterly nonsensical that a County Council with over £250 million in the bank, should propose closing a third of the libraries in Essex in order to save just under £1 million a year. Whether or not this is good economics is highly debatable but it is undoubtedly very bad politics!

To use a popular expression “the game is not worth the candle” and therefore, I believe that the best possible outcome is that at the end of the consultation, which I believe will show strong support for libraries across the entire County, not least in my constituency, Essex County Council would be well advised to take the strong opinions of their residents into account and – drop the proposed library closure programme altogether.

Summary

I have attempted in this letter to explain the very real value of libraries to local communities in a 21st Century context, ranging from the old traditional roles of providing books and other data for people to enjoy, right through to providing hubs in local communities, where people can meet safely, to work together for the collective good and to combat modern ills such as social isolation. I therefore strongly believe that local libraries play a vital role in the heart of our communities and that they should be treasured as such.

With regard to the two libraries specifically which are under threat in my constituency, I believe that both Hockley and Hullbridge libraries should be upgraded to Tier 2, such that they would continue to provide a comprehensive range of services, funded and staffed by Essex County Council.

I believe I have strong support from my constituents in arguing this case and I intend to place this letter on Facebook shortly, so they can see what I have done on their behalf.

Whilst I fully appreciate the need for Essex County Council to budget prudently going forward, it simply makes no sense to me to close a third of the libraries in one of the largest counties in England, in order to save barely £1 million – whilst you have a quarter of a billion pounds sitting in the bank! I will attempt to make this point directly to the Leadership of Essex County Council, as this process plays out.



I do hope that the points that I have made in this letter on behalf of my constituents will be taken seriously into account by you, County Councillor Barker and I would like to request a meeting with you, accompanied by County Councillor Carole Weston and two small delegations from both Hockley and Hullbridge libraries, perhaps sometime next month, once you have had a chance to examine the responses you have received to the consultation.

Finally, I am copying this letter to County Councillor David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council; County Councillor John Jowers, the Chairman of Essex County Council and all the County Councillors who cover my constituency, including County Councillor Carole Weston, whose County division includes both Hockley and Hullbridge. I will also be sending a copy of this letter to the Chairman of both Hockley and Hullbridge Parish Councils; to the FOHL and to Megan Williams and Carla Vaughan, who have led the campaign to save the library in Hockley.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Mark Francois

Member of Parliament for Rayleigh and Wickford

CC County Councillor David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council
County Councillor John Jowers, Chairman of Essex County Council
County Councillor Carole Weston (covering both Hockley and Hullbridge)
County Councillor Malcolm Maddocks
County Councillor June Lumley
County Councillor Terry Cutmore
County Councillor Mike Steptoe
County Councillor Tony Ball
County Councillor Malcolm Buckley
Councillor Roy Martin, Chairman, Hockley Parish Council
Councillor Angelina Marriot, Chairman, Hullbridge Parish Council
Tony Pennock, Secretary, Friends of Hullbridge Library
Megan Williams and Carla Vaughan, Campaign to Save Hockley Library