



11 July 2012

David McNulty
Chief Executive
Surrey County Council
County Hall
Penryn Road
Kingston upon Thames
Surrey KT1 2DN

Dear Mr McNulty

An Open Letter from Chair of Friends of Stoneleigh Library (FSL)

I am writing as the Chair of Friends of Stoneleigh Library, a Charitable Association set up in July 2011 in response to Surrey County Council's (SCC) call for local community groups to form a community partnership to jointly provide library services to their local communities.

Importance of local libraries

The stated aim of FSL is to ensure the future of Stoneleigh Library for the benefit and enjoyment of local people.

We are encouraged by the fact that SCC has stated repeatedly that it has NO intention to close any of the libraries in Surrey as it is abundantly clear that local libraries such as Stoneleigh are truly valued by the local communities in which they are located. It seems that we all agree that closure of any of the ten libraries would have a detrimental affect on the needs of those protected under the Equality Act 2010, particularly older people and children.

Cost of the Community Partnered Libraries (CPLs)

Over the past year we have been trying to work with the library service towards Stoneleigh Library becoming a CPL by recruiting volunteers, participating in training, fundraising and promoting Stoneleigh Library in the local community.

Whilst we understood that the implementation of CPL's was not primarily a cost saving exercise it had previously been stated that there would be a saving of around £180,000 annually across the ten libraries by the implication of the Community Partnership. We were therefore astounded to read of Helyn Clack's statement to the Cabinet on 29th May 2012 that there would be NO savings made to the Library service through the use of volunteers in Community Partnered libraries. This statement seems to bring the whole purpose of CPLs into question. The question we ask is 'if using volunteers in a CPL is going to cost the Council the same as having paid staff in post then surely having paid staff is preferable?'

We would like this question to be addressed before we, as an organisation, can consider continuing to work towards forming a CPL.

Benefits of CPL

We can see some positive aspects to CPLs in that they could provide the opportunity for local people to become more involved in their local library through helping promote the library services and having the opportunity to shape it to suit local needs and we can also see the benefits to individuals of volunteering, however we do not consider that these benefits alone are sufficient to justify the withdrawal of paid staff.

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Professional support

Setting aside the financial aspects, if Surrey County Council intends to continue with CPLs we have concerns about whether the level of professional support at 20% of library opening hours will be sufficient to ensure the smooth running of a library. We consider that the future service would be better provided by regular staff being there for all the hours the library is open rather than only 20% of the time.

We are not at all clear about what criteria were used in deciding on ongoing professional support for 20% of the library opening hours and would ask for clarification on this.

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that since 31st March 2012, when the permanent staff left, Stoneleigh Library has been run using "bank" staff. We feel that this has led to a lack of continuity and cohesiveness and there have been times when the library has been closed due to the unavailability of staff to cover. This cannot continue indefinitely.

Library database

We think that the library database should be retained in the community partnered library for the use of the staff. At Stoneleigh we are fortunate to have the self service terminals and the computerised database and this works well. If staff are retained within the library then there is no rationale for removing these terminals.

Questionnaire and Equalities Training

We have been dismayed by the confusing and duplicated questionnaire sent to library users asking them to give their views on the training needed for volunteers in regard to equality and diversity. We have had many local people coming to us expressing their confusion as to why they were being asked questions that they did not feel qualified to answer. If the response rate is low this is likely to be due to the design of the questionnaire and the results will not be representative of library users and we therefore have concerns about the validity and applicability of the results.

We were also perturbed that our steering group members, who are library members, were instructed to fill in questionnaires twice, one as a "library user" and one as a "steering group member." This is likely again to skew results.

I would like to inform you that I have only filled in one questionnaire as my view as both a library user and Chair of FSL is the same. My view is that equalities and diversity training should be to the same level as present library staff.

Consultation with prospective CPLs

We would like to state that on a number of occasions you have indicated that you would meet with prospective CPLs, but these meetings have all been cancelled at short notice. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns and have the opportunity to have an input into any planning and proposals to be put to the Cabinet for decision. I am sure together we can try and work on a sustainable model for the future of the library services.

We await your response.

Yours Sincerely

Diana Kay
Chair of Friends of Stoneleigh Library