

Communities and Environment Scrutiny Committee 8.10.24.

Report by Michael Hanley

Chair: Eamonn Hennessy

1. Eamonn Hennessy (EH, LD): Explain the Call-in procedure.

Call-in instigated by five Labour councillors: Andy Coles, Jane Murphy, Bev Morgan, Theresa Assoud and Anne Burns.

Reason: On 10.9.24 the cabinet decided to relocate Ulverston Library (previously across the main road through Ulverston at King's Road) to The Coronation Hall (known locally as "The Coro").

The purpose of the meeting is to scrutinise the cabinet decision.

Outcome options: (a) The original decision stands,

(b) the committee gives recommendations and the original decision stands,

(c) the committee advises the cabinet to reconsider the decision.

The committee referred to The Gunning Principals in making their decision when considering the public consultation conducted by WAFC prior to making their decision to close the library at Kings Road. There are four points to the principals:

1. A final decision has not been made at the time of the consultation.

2. There is sufficient information to give an informed response.

3. There is enough time for the consultation.

4. The decision makers must take the results of the consultation into account in making their final decision.

2. Call-in Members present their reasons

A Coles(AC, L): Discussed the consultation. There was not meaningful engagement with the public. Public bodies should adopt certain principals, thought should be taken to get real engagement. Users of the library should have had the opportunity to express their opinion rather than give their opinions on a preferred option. Was there any discussion with the trustees of the library? There was not fruitful dialogue. Were there any alternative views?...no! The objectives of any consultation should be clear. Engagement of the public should take place early in the process. The evidence base should also be presented at an early stage, was thus done?...no! The consultation period was only 4 weeks, during August. It should have been 12 weeks. Other forms of consultation should have been used: email, social media, working groups etc. This did not take place. The MP (Michelle Scroggham) said she had funding (for the library). An email to the local MP may have solved the funding. If it was in Tim Farron's constituency, this would not have happened.

EH: Can we avoid political references?

B Morgan (BM, L): I believe that the process of decision making was flawed. The MP asked the cabinet to defer the decision, yet the cabinet went ahead with the decision on 10.9.24.

The cabinet made a decision without having all the facts. The consultation was about telling the public the choices. None of those involved in making the decision have an affinity with the area. Peter Thornton (councillor) has repeated many times in WAFC meetings, it's about the services not the buildings. £2.5 million was allocated to the Coronation Hall, £0.5 million from the Borderlands Fund. I would like the scrutiny committee to take the decision that the cabinet was too hasty and that the decision be reconsidered.

A Burns (AB, L): The cabinet was asked to defer the decision and there was no need to rush the decision.

T Assoud (TA, L): The decision by the cabinet was hasty and rash. Working in partnership with the community was of prime importance.

### 3. Witnesses

Michelle Scrogam (MS, MP): Discussed the funding. The town council's views were completely ignored. They wanted the Kings Road Library to be reopened. GSK (Glaxo Smith Kline pharmaceuticals, Ulverston factory, making cephalosporin antibiotics, due to close in 2025) have offered £2 million. The government is looking to work with local communities. I ask the committee to make sure that all options are discussed. Jonathan Brook (leader of WAFC) recently admitted that the process was flawed

Ceri Hutton (representative of Ulverston Town Council): We were surprised when we were told that the library was to close (due to electrical problems). The offers to fix the electrical faults for free were refused. I had to resort to the Freedom of Information process to get answers. This was not an open and genuine consultation process. They were told a £2 million grant had been raised but went ahead and made their decision. Initially it was an electrical fault, then the heating system, then the whole building. When I got to see the electrical defects, there were only a handful that were important, an electrician would have taken 5 days to rectify them. If the same principals were applied to any other council building, WAFC would have no buildings open. Other witness who is involved in running the Coronation Hall: The transfer of the library to the Coronation Hall has made residents feel it is a done deal. Discussed deficits made by the hall prior and during the pandemic being the main reason for the relocation of the library to the Coronation Hall.

Mark Wilson (MW, leader of Ulverston Town Council): The consultation was a failure.

### 4. Cabinet Members' Response

V Taylor (VT, LD): Discussed the decision of the 10th of September. The securing of the future of the Coronation Hall has not been mentioned. The Coro needs an anchor tenant to make it sustainable. Guidance encourages councils to look for alternative arrangements for libraries to make them more sustainable.

Michelle Scrogam refers to private funding for the library but nothing about funding for the Coro. The Coro needs an anchor tenant. Capital funding for the library does not address the future funding for the Coro.

Libraries are constrained by existing resources, as a result only views on option 7 were invited (in the consultation, option 7: to co-locate the library services in the Coro and Coro redeveloped). Appropriate consultation was taken. 53% of respondents agreed. Nobody owes more to libraries than me. I dispute that having the library in the Coro is a problem. The library in the Coro is still being developed.

P Thornton (PT, LD): I want to say something about this £2 million. We haven't seen the governance around this money. A spokesman for GSK referred to a £2 million donation, would local people want it to go to a council building?

### 5. Scrutiny Committee Members' Questions

EH: Asked about the timing of the £2 million offer. Was it two days before the decision or the evening before?

Officer (Director of Thriving Communities): There was a meeting and the £2 million offer was discussed. We will be meeting again to discuss this on Friday.

B McEwan (BME, L): Did you have clarification of this £2 million at this meeting?

MS: I emailed to ask for deferment of the decision , but you refused. I had the offer of £2 million at that time. My family moved to this area many years ago because of GSK.

H Irving (HI, C): I believe this £2 million was allocated to upgrade the leisure centre.

MS: GSK said that WAFC had turned down the offer of land, they were categoric that the money wasn't coming for leisure.

Pam Duke (Senior WAFC officer): The land, if accepted, would have left the council with a liability. We didn't see where that money (£2 million) was coming from.

VT: We cannot offer something that is not feasible or that we cannot follow through, only 2 (of the 8 options) were feasible. Option 6 (Kings Road Library re-open, Coro redeveloped) was not feasible due to ongoing finances of keeping both going. I know people would like free choice but we cannot fund free choice.

The legal officer was asked to confirm legal principles.

Legal Officer: Discussed the Gunning Principles. The consultation should take place during the formative stage, have adequate time and the results be conscientiously taken into account.

J Boak (JB, LD): Was the consultation ignored?

VT: The consultation was not ignored.

JB: How was the town council survey conducted?

MW: We tried to make it as clear as possible. 3500 people wanted to save the Kings Road Library. We could have conducted a referendum but that would have been too expensive at £45k.

MS: Councillor Taylor says the only financially viable option was option 7, but that is not true as option 6 is coloured amber (in the red, amber, green coded diagram for affordability, the same as option 7).

PT: Discussed offers of free electrical work. We did not receive any concrete offers of this.

MS: There was no route for volunteer workers to discuss this with WAFC.

PT: We had an estimate of £2 million to rectify the problems. The electrical defects would have cost £250k.

Allan Harty (AH, Senior WAFC officer): We have a holistic view on how we manage our buildings. We have a £10 million programme every year, looking at the estate. Arcing was noticed in the building (Kings Road Library). Then looking at the fabric of the building, putting all those in gave us a £1.9 million cost.

EH: What are the implications for the longterm survival of this building (The Coro).

Possible loss of both buildings, possibly a charity to run The Coro?

VT: It's difficult for any body to run an arts and culture building. It needs subsidies from somewhere or other. If we didn't have the library here, where would the money come from? We inherited arts funding from the previous administrations (3 district councils and county council) which wasn't over generous. In the former Eden area, there is nothing at all. If you fund one, you should fund them all. The way arts was funded 40-50 years ago is not now possible.

OT: There is no threat to The Coro Hall. We don't know what future councils will do. If the library stays in The Coro Hall, it secures it's future. In Kirkby Stephen, Alston and Dalton the libraries have moved into community spaces.

AC: Point of order: Dalton Library is only open 29 days per year.

MS: We used to have a Town Council building (in Ulverston) but we had to give this up to save The Coro. PT has said The Coro Hall is not under threat but VT implied that it is.

6. Committee retired to discuss it's conclusion privately.

Decision: The cabinet acted reasonably by not deferring the decision but the consultation was not fair and transparent in that the consultees (the public) were directed to a specific option (option 7).

The committee advised the cabinet to review their decision.

Vote: Unanimous in favour.