

Public meeting about Uppertorpe Library 22nd March 2014

Called by Friends of Zest and held at the Zest Centre

Dave Jeffries (Chair of Friends of Zest Steering group) opened the meeting, reminding people of the position we were in when the Council started this round of consultation: Uppertorpe Library would be classed as an 'independent' library with no staff, running costs or access to SCC book stock. In effect, this meant that the library would close. The Friends of Zest organised a petition, held public meetings, put on the Readathon, and Anna Whitfield of the Friends co-ordinated the consultation of children and young people who use the library, and wrote this up in a report which was given to the library consultation staff.

SCC came back with new plans: 'independent' libraries would now be termed 'associate' libraries; SCC would cover building costs for 3 years, they would continue to have SCC book stock and would be able to use the SCC library reservation system. This is a considerable improvement to the original plan but there are still 3 categories of library within the city, heavy reliance on volunteers to run 10 libraries, and after 3 years the future is uncertain.

Councillor Mazher Iqbal commended the children's and young people's consultation. He discussed what he had done with his colleagues. They had accepted that the original model for independent libraries was not satisfactory and they had come up with additional money. Committing to 3 years funding of the library is a risk for SCC as finance only comes in 2 year tranches, but they are prepared to do this. Building related costs will be covered for associate libraries, there will be a peppercorn rent, they will operate on either lease or license and can opt in or out of the book catalogue system. They can have People's Network computers or organise their own software. There will be workshops explaining what's required of groups running libraries, ongoing training and support, but SCC cannot meet staffing costs. Groups won't have to compete against each other for funding, but will have to apply for it.

Cllr Iqbal then answered various questions which were sent before the meeting:

q. Why has Council tax not been increased?

This was a very difficult decision, but it was decided not to increase it because of the cost of living crisis. SCC is getting ample evidence of this, including from the rise in the number of food banks. He said that a recent poll on the Sheffield Forum came out strongly against a raise in Council Tax. An increase to Council tax would require a referendum, costing SCC £250-300 thousand. The likelihood would be a no vote, thus wasting that money.

q. What if Uppertorpe library cannot get sufficient volunteers?

Cllr Iqbal explained that SCC was not just handing over the keys to libraries but was offering training and advice, would give continual support and would employ a library volunteer co-ordinator. They will also look at 'buddying' arrangements with hub libraries.

q. What is the difference now between 'Community-led' and 'Associate' libraries?

Community-led libraries will have up to 15 hours of library development support.

Janet Skirrow, Zest Chief Executive gave out an Information Sheet about Zest's involvement in the library (see Discussion Documents under Resources on the Friends of Zest website: <http://friendsofzest.wordpress.com/>). She prefaced her remarks by saying that Zest would much have preferred the library to continue as is, funded and staffed by SCC, but 'we are where we are' and Zest wants the library to work as well as possible.

Zest has had its initial bid to run the library approved. Zest is a charity rooted in the local community and run by trustees half of whom are local residents. It is unique in the city for providing a swimming pool, gym, and support for health and employment. It accepts GP referrals to the gym and offers activities for children including sports and a youth club.

Zest sees Uppertorpe library as a key part of Zest. To some extent, transition to a volunteer-run library will be easier for Uppertorpe than at some other libraries because the building is up and running anyway, and other arrangements e.g. around safeguarding children, are already in place. Also, Zest counter staff already deal with library queries (e.g. self-issues, computers) when SCC library staff are not around, and this will continue.

In addition to all the ideas on her Information sheet, Janet commented: Zest would like to get the message out about Uppertorpe's long opening hours and superior disabled access – hoping to increase use of the library. When talking about 'opportunities' (things Zest is interested in) she added that Zest feels that providing a library service to children is of the greatest importance.

Janet stressed that the key challenge is recruiting and retaining volunteers. Zest gets lots of offers from volunteers, but there is a fast throughput of volunteers (e.g. students, job-seekers). There have been 12 offers to volunteer at the library to date. We will need more people to volunteer to make the library sustainable.

Questions from the floor

q. How will the £262,000 for associate libraries be spent?

Cllr Iqbal – a sum for rates and utilities will be allocated to each library based on present usage.

q. What will happen to librarians – will they be made redundant?

Cllr Iqbal – SCC is losing £57 million this year and will lose 600 staff. There will be a further loss of £50 million next year. Overall a 50% reduction in budget. 75 library full time equivalent posts will be lost.

q. To whom do the books belong – how are they re-stocked in a particular library?

Cllr Iqbal – There are often book donations to specific libraries. Zest could buy books for Upperthorpe library – they will need their own system for those books. Other books will belong to SCC.

q. A woman said she would struggle, morally, to take over a librarian's job as a volunteer. Who will oversee children on computers? And, if there was bad or disruptive behaviour by children, she would feel worried about tackling this as a volunteer.

Cllr Iqbal said that ***if/when the budget situation improves, SCC will prioritise support to libraries.*** SCC will work in partnership with volunteers and support them.

q. A man who's involved with Stannington library said that their bid to run Stannington was based on having 2 part-time librarians to run it. They will be looking for ways to fund this. A volunteer is never going to be as good as a professional librarian.

Janet Skirrow acknowledged the moral dilemma around volunteers replacing librarians. She assured the meeting that Zest does not want this situation and is simply doing its best to maintain the library.

Re. Safeguarding and supervision issues with children – Zest is already dealing with these issues. People's Network computers have many protocols over what content can be accessed.

q. Changes that have taken place to the plans for associate libraries are appreciated. But Upperthorpe library is different – and gives 'best value' under the current arrangements. It's really important that Upperthorpe Library is seen as a model.

Cllr Iqbal agreed with this, acknowledged that Upperthorpe Library is a model of good practice and that people have come from across the country to see how the Zest Centre, with its co-located services, works.

q. A woman commented that she was worried by the long term strategy for libraries, relying on volunteers. The volunteer community has changed and volunteers are often transient. Managing them requires considerable resources and might, overall, cost as much as employing librarians. We need librarians in the associate libraries and must find ways of getting experienced staff into them.

Freezing council tax is a false strategy – it's the same austerity strategy as followed by the government and the freeze hurts poor people the most. For example, bus

fares have increased because SCC has reduced its grant to SYPTE. She hoped that SCC would re-think its strategy on Council Tax next year.

Cllr Iqbal said that two thirds of Councils in the country have not raised their Council Tax. Here in Sheffield, they are looking at buddying arrangements between Hub and Associate libraries to support volunteers. Everything is driven by the funding climate – over the next few years, SCC's budget will be cut by half.

Janet Skirrow commented that whilst buddying and other arrangements can help, there is a need for day-to-day input to support volunteers with specific problems at the time they arise. Zest would like to have a part-time volunteer co-ordinator and are looking at finding funding for this for one year.

q. Bernard Little (local resident) asked if the referendum on Council Tax would cost the same if it were held at the same time as local elections. He commented that it was disingenuous to use the poll on the Sheffield Forum as an indication of acceptance of a Council Tax rise – this poll had involved less than 250 people.

Bernard Little also commented that work and his family takes all his time and energy and that he has no time to volunteer. Many others are in this position, and are facing a later retirement age as well. He said that it was not realistic to rely on volunteers to run a library.

Cllr Iqbal replied that if library buildings are closed they will attract anti-social behaviour, will have to be boarded up and ultimately would probably have to be sold off. He also said that ***By retaining these buildings, SCC has given a commitment to re-invest back into libraries when times are good.***

He also clarified that the £262 thousand for Associate libraries is £262K *per year* for the next 3 years. In the past, SCC made cuts to library services without thinking through the consequences. That is why the Council carried out a fundamental review, starting in 2012.

Janet Skirrow added that there are sources of funding such as the Lottery, which might be available, although there will be stiff competition for funds. Volunteers could support Zest in making applications. There may also be local grant-giving organisations to which Friends of Zest could apply, where Zest itself is not eligible to apply.

A man commented from the floor that it was hugely regrettable that SCC could not support the innovative approach here at the Zest Centre and that Upperthorpe library, co-located within the Centre, offers best value for money.

Isobel Thomas (Business Development Manager at Zest) gave out a paper with ideas about the future of Friends of Zest. These included putting the group on a more formal footing with a constitution and making minutes of meetings publicly available. Zest would particularly like Friends of Zest to support the library, becoming

the Friends of Uppertorpe Library group and Isobel discussed things that the Friends could do to support the library (see Friends of Zest website). These included fund-raising, organising activities such as book groups and events, representing library service users' views to Zest, raising the profile of the library in the local community, and helping to identify volunteers.

Dave Jeffries commented that the Friends of Zest has been completely occupied so far with the campaign to save Uppertorpe Library; but as we are now at a different stage, we are thinking about a new focus. There will be a meeting to discuss the future of Friends of Zest on **31st March, at 7 p.m. in the Zest cafe.**

A man commented from the floor that he would rather focus directly on fund-raising than setting up a constitution for yet another small voluntary group, but Isobel Thomas pointed out that for fund-raising, it is necessary to have a constitution.

Marcus O'Hagan from Friends of Zest said that he was still waiting for the answers to a number of questions he had raised during the consultation, and he hates the idea of facilitating job losses. However Uppertorpe Library was very lucky to be located within the Zest Centre with all its resources, and there was big potential here for the library to succeed. He urged people to get involved: 'don't do what you don't want to do, but please get involved'.

Meeting closed.

Date of next Friends of Zest meeting: March 31st, 7p.m.

<http://friendsofzest.wordpress.com/>