

PROPOSED CLOSURE OF ORE LIBRARY

**Submission to East Sussex County Council public consultation
concerning the proposed closure of Ore Library.**

**Submitted by: Councillor Laurie Loe (County Councillor for Baird
and Ore)**

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Introduction

I wish this to be considered as part of the public consultation process before a decision is made on the closure, or not, of the Library in Ore.

Whilst I agree that cost savings should be made where possible in all aspects of the Council's activities and the library service should not be exempt I would ask that you consider the following points before deciding on the closure of Ore Library.

As a preface to my observations I would point out to Council that this matter, as I am sure they are aware, has aroused considerable concern, anxiety and anger amongst the residents of Ore and has been the subject of an intense social media campaign. I have received more communications regarding this than all others issues combined in my short time as Councillor and have been subject to personal abuse both on social media and in direct correspondence for not rushing to the barricades about the matter. I have also, thankfully, received many well argued, thought provoking and insightful observations concerning the proposal to which I have given due consideration.

Rather than leaping to judgement I have given this matter considerable thought, read the Council proposals set out in "East Sussex Libraries, The Way Forward" and studied the documents of the Libraries Transformation Programme produced following the cabinet meeting of 19th September before formulating my views.

Having taken time for due consideration of the proposal I would ask that the cabinet consider the following points,

Firstly I consider that Ore is significantly different to the other libraries proposed for closure both socially, demographically and geographically. Whilst I am sure the other libraries are important to their communities I feel that retaining a library in Ore is essential as, uniquely amongst the libraries proposed for closure, it fulfils all the criteria of need mentioned in the Council documents .

NEEDS

In many places in the document “The Way Forward” the Council acknowledges that Ore is an area of “high needs” and it features amongst the areas of highest social deprivation or greatest needs on most of the maps and tables shown in the various documents and appendices. The need for a continued library service in Ore is therefore self-evident.

Under the heading “A Needs based Library Service” the documents highlights the four needs (Reading and Literacy, Economic Development, Health and Wellbeing and Digital Exclusion) that the library service aims to address and, in all of these, parts of Hastings which, although not specifically mentioned, would certainly include Ore ranks high amongst the most deprived, not just in the County but in the Country.

This in itself should surely be a reason to re-consider as the document identifies the need, offers the library service as part of the solution yet proposes to close it!

The argument that the new, improved Hastings Library, which I welcome, could meet the needs of the people of Ore appears several times but I think this is somewhat disingenuous given the travel times quoted. I do not want to be in the car with the person who gets from Ore to Hastings Library in 6 minutes as claimed in “The Way Forward”. That, and the 18 minutes bus journey, may be driving times but what about parking? The major difficulty with Hastings Library is, and always will be, vehicle access, the street parking is minimal and larger car parks are expensive and quite a long walk away. The nearest, Priory Street, also involves a climb down steep steps.

I have been fortunate enough to visit the new library as a “work in progress” and am sure that, when finished, it will be wonderful library fit for the 21st century but for the people of Ore there is still the problem of accessibility and convenience.

I could not see figures for the demographic of people using Ore library specifically in the document but these figures were kindly supplied following a meeting with Nick Skelton and this shows that, of those users whose age is known 31% are below 16 indicating that Ore library is an important facility for parents with children who are less likely to have used the car to get to the library and whilst bus services are good

and prices reasonable the additional cost and time used would certainly deter a lot of people. As the youngest member of East Sussex County Council this situation obviously resonates strongly with me.

The other suggested alternative of using East Hastings Children's Centre as an outreach for Children's library services is also not ideal. It is quite a distance from the village centre and I would think that most people incorporate the trip to the library with shopping or other service based activities which is much more difficult if they have to go with their children to the East Hastings Children's Centre.

COSTS

With regard to the question of cost savings whilst I fully support the Council's need to save money I feel that the small economies achieved by closing Ore library are outweighed by the social cost. The figure given in "The Way Forward" for annual running costs is £15,000 of which £11,500 is wages and I suspect that the staff are more likely to be re-located to Hastings than made redundant meaning a saving of £3,500 p.a. Even the estimated 5 year (2017 - 2022) running costs of £27,073 shown in the Property Assessment (Technical Appendix 4) only equates to £5,414.60 p.a. A useful saving, but hardly worth losing a library for. Also from the table in appendix 3 (Service description and analysis) it seems as if the running cost per hour of Ore Library are 4th lowest in the county at £16.43, again not a huge amount.

I acknowledge that Ore Library use and membership figures are quite low as shown in the various tables in appendix 3 (Service description and analysis) and are declining although less than the county average but I would argue that for those people who do use the library it is a vital lifeline to enjoyment, learning and the outside world.

Whilst my preferred option would be to keep Ore Library open and I would urge the Council to do this I understand that this may not be the recommendation so will the Council consider other options before the Library is closed and the services lost for ever.

ANOTHER WAY FORWARD

Using the Council's 3 key factors from "The Way Forward" I believe the "need" for library services in Ore is proven and, should the decision be to close, before this happens the community should be given a chance to show its "want" for library services by deferring any closure for a period giving time to consider alternatives.

I acknowledge that the community must play its part and show that the library service is wanted by them. Any closure of the library would coincide with the opening of the newly refurbished Hastings Library and I think that a "period of grace" should be given to enable people to visit these new facilities, compare them with Ore Library and choose which they prefer to use. If usage of Ore Library declines significantly then maybe a decision to close it and relocate some of its services would be appropriate. Put simply, "Use it or Lose it."

Being a realist I understand that the Council's decision may be to close the library and, whilst not supporting this option, I have had discussions with both members of the local Ore community and also Council officers concerning possible ways forward. I have had particularly positive and useful meetings with the Ore Community Centre and also Nick Skelton, Assistant Director Communities at East Sussex County Council in which many alternatives were considered ranging from relocation of certain facilities and services to a complete community take-over of the library in its current building.

These ideas were discussed in principle only and would obviously take time to develop and put into fruition so would ask that if the decision to close the library it remains open whilst time is allowed for further discussions, in which I would be happy to be involved, to allow a smooth transfer of as many library services as possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would re-iterate my view that, having considered the matter very carefully, Ore library should remain and would urge the cabinet not to proceed with the proposed closure. The people of Ore already feel marginalised and ignored by the Council and the closure of their library will be seen as yet another example of Council indifference to their community.

I would end by quoting the *Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England*¹⁰, endorsed jointly by Rob Wilson MP and Cllr Ian Stephens (Chair, Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, Local Government Association). This was launched on 1st December 2016 by Libraries Taskforce and identifies 7 outcomes that library services contribute toward, that it considers are critical to the individuals and communities in their areas, as follows:

- cultural and creative enrichment
- increased reading and literacy
- improved digital access and literacy
- helping everyone achieve their full potential
- healthier and happier lives
- greater prosperity
- stronger, more resilient communities

It goes on to say “Put simply, libraries and libraries staff can provide the knowledge, information and inspiration to support and empower people to make transformational changes to their lives”.

I consider that these aims, ideals and objectives are things that the community and people of Ore want, need and deserve at a convenient local level and their library should remain open.