

Burton Town Deal – Proposed Library Move

Decision made: 15 December 2021

Decision – *(a) Subject to confirmation from Government and the Town Board that a Town Fund allocation of £6,991,549, or greater, is awarded following submission of the necessary Business Case, and that the identified shortfall of £1,036,382 can be resourced from either the Town Board or other external funding; Cabinet agrees to re-locate Burton Library and consolidate other County offices into the Market Hall and Crossley House with a maximum capital investment from the County Council of £1,067,000.*

(b) Cabinet delegates authority to negotiate with East Staffordshire Borough Council, secure their ongoing support and deal with all aspects of any property transactions necessary to implement (a) above to the Property Sub Committee

(c) Cabinet delegates authority to submit the Final Business Case to East Staffordshire Borough Council to the Director of Corporate Services in consultation with the County Treasurer.

Reasons for call in

1. Inadequate consideration given to the principle finding of the public consultation, which confirmed 77% of respondents did not agree with the proposed library move.

In summer 2021, SCC carried out a community engagement and consultation exercise about the proposed library move. Out of 1,161 respondents, 77% did not agree with the proposed library move. 48% of those who were regular library users stated that they would not continue to use the library if it was moved into Burton Market Hall. The Cabinet report also confirmed that

"the strength of objection is highest amongst respondents who said they were regular library users or living within the eight Burton wards."

We would like to point out that unlike a petition where you might simply add your name online to a particular cause, this consultation asked many questions with options for adding free text – 781 respondents added detailed free text according to the Cabinet report. The process would have taken the average person 15-20 minutes to complete. 1,161 responses is therefore a significant number and warrants serious and careful consideration.

The strength of this objection should in our view have triggered SCC and its Burton Town Deal partners to reflect on the current proposal and consider alternative ideas for library location and potential uses for Burton Market Hall. Instead, SCC and partners gave no consideration whatsoever to alternative ideas and continued to pursue the proposed library move against the wishes of Burton residents, which has culminated in SCC Cabinet making the decision to proceed with the proposed library move on 15 December 2021.

We call on SCC Cabinet to urgently work with its Burton Town Deal partners to consider alternative ideas which keep the library in its current location.

2. The Cabinet Decision to proceed with the move of Burton Library into Burton Market Hall was decided without giving sufficient consideration to the alternative option of retaining and refurbishing the current Burton Library building.

The Cabinet decided in a Part 2 meeting in August 2020 to agree in principle to the proposed library move subject to meeting four criteria. The criteria were set to ensure that the proposed library move would bring about economic benefits to Burton and not expose SCC to any obvious financial risk. When we analyse at least three of these criteria below, the alternative option of retaining and refurbishing the current library is likely to outperform the proposed library move, yet there has been no public debate on this issue and no real consideration of this in the Cabinet Report – the only option that is seriously considered is the proposed library move. Taking each relevant criteria in turn:

a) The proposal delivers the relevant Property MTFS revenue savings

The financial analysis presented at Appendix 9 of the Cabinet Report contains various options. Option 8a and 8b are essentially the proposed library move. Options 2 and 3 retain the library in its current location.

On face value, options 8a and 8b appear to be the better options in respect of generating MTFS revenue savings, however options 8a and 8b include:

- £1,067,000 "Investment Funding" from SCC which is already committed by SCC.

- £6,991,549 Stronger Towns Fund funding.

If you were to include the £1 million Investment Funding as part of option 2 or 3, this would significantly reduce overall borrowing and thus the costs of borrowing, meaning options 2 and 3 may generate increased MTFS revenue savings compared with what is shown in Appendix 9.

In addition, we believe that some of the Stronger Towns Funding could be repurposed for refurbishing the current library building, especially if the library building was to become part of Project D (another Stronger Towns Fund Board project) and therefore this could entirely remove any borrowing and associated costs from the project and mean options 2 and 3 would be clear winners in terms of generation of MTFS savings. We have not seen any financial analysis which compares the two ideas in the way explained above.

- b) The proposal can be shown to increase town centre footfall and vitality

The Cabinet Report did not compare town centre footfall projections expected from the proposed library move to projections if the library was to remain and be refurbished in its current location. If we then consider as per the consultation results that 48% of current library users will not use Burton library if it moves into Burton Market Hall, we are perplexed as to why SCC would decide to run the risk that library usage may decline overall never mind that the project will cost over £9 million and have a serious impact on SCC resources and capacity.

- c) The proposal facilitates broader regeneration activities on the existing library site.

If Burton Library move goes ahead, ESBC will secure the library site for redevelopment. On 13 December 2021, ESBC recently released their vision of the library site and surrounding area by Burton's waterfront, otherwise known as Project D. This vision to date includes cladding the current library building and repurposing it as a Washlands Visitor Centre.

The current library building is far too big for a Washlands Visitor Centre and ESBC acknowledge this by stating that they will need

to consider additional uses for the building such as a conference centre and the inclusion of bike hire facilities. This begs the question as to why leaving the library in the current library building and adding a Washlands Visitor Centre is not seriously being considered. This would provide the additional use that the building needs and could create a "cultural quarter" by the river if ESBC go ahead with their idea of creating a heritage centre close by too. Incorporating the library into Project D could contribute to the broader regeneration activities envisaged but again no serious consideration of this idea appears to have been given.

Overall, we believe that Cabinet should look again at the benefits of retaining the library in its current position and work with ESBC to finalise exciting proposals for Project D. Moving the library is not the "key" to unlocking ambitious plans, in fact leaving it where it is could make Project D a more viable proposition and create an exciting cultural quarter for Burton.

- 3. Burton library in its current location is one of the most frequently used libraries across Staffordshire. This speaks for itself. Moving Burton library into Burton Market Hall will mean the library loses its prime location overlooking the green expanse of the Washlands and lose proximity to a large and generally quiet car park. This may mean fewer residents use the library service as shown in the responses to the public consultation.**

Concerns over the effect of the move on Burton library service have been cast aside due to wider regeneration goals, however moving a library and offices into a traditional Market Hall and events space doesn't particularly strike us as exciting or imaginative and therefore we would like to ask the Cabinet to re-consider in consultation with local members whether overall this move is actually worth it, and in doing so have due regard to ESBC's vision for the current library site which was only released on 13 December 2021 – two days before the SCC Cabinet Decision.