

BUDGET STATEMENT TO BANES COUNCIL REF: THE RELOCATION OF BATH CENTRAL LIBRARY TO LEWIS HOUSE

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Relevant experience: background in advising central and local government on workplace transformation, relocation and renewal. Former workplace sustainability adviser

OGC/Treasury; consultant to National Audit Office on value-for-money investigations into government workplace delivery including PFI projects within Whitehall.

Caveat: The author is awaiting the council's response to his FOI request for discovery of all relevant project documents.

Statement and questions:

1. Too many local authorities and central government departments have not allowed enough time and money to develop fit-for-purpose design solutions. Because of the amount of design changes that ensue they encounter cost overruns and late delivery - poor outcomes. The huge but poorly recognised demand from users of Bath Central Library for daily access - circa 1,000 person footfall, needs full and proper consultation. Has the council allowed enough in their budget and timetable for full user consultation and the development of a fit-for-purpose design brief? Will this be addressed?
2. Due diligence would require the council to fully consider the impact - economic and social of withdrawing up to half a million footfalls/visits to the central library per year on the surrounding area. The economic, social and environmental impacts of creating a 'black hole' in the centre of cities is well documented. Bath city centre retail vacancy rates are accelerating. Has this aspect of due diligence been carried out?

Risks:

1. Project overspend, late delivery, poor outcomes for Bath citizens and visitors.
2. History of local authority and central government overruns on IT related projects.
3. Projected savings of £800,000 per annum may need to be independently audited. This figure is believed to be above the current annual library spend. Clarification is called for.
4. Judicial Review and associated costs.

Summary:

Bath Central Library is on the public front line, in a key location. Its contribution to the local economy both visible and hidden e.g. supporting highly successful Bath authors, research students, adult mental health, community cohesion and child and youth education may have been undervalued and ignored in the Council's bottom line. In a World Heritage city renowned for its literary festivals and dependent on cultural tourism, our purpose-built central library needs to remain at the very heart of Bath. A much stronger vision of its key role in the local economy and an upgrading of its 'front line' design are required. The Council's current proposals are at risk of accelerating the economic, social and cultural decline of the city.

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