

Paul Stansall RIBA
Bath Library Downgrading - High Risk of Fiscal Failure

I am an architect with five decades in teaching, research and design. I have worked across the UK, continental Europe and North America. I have advised the National Audit Office on value-for-money savings across the central government estate. I advised HM Treasury on workplace procurement policy. My specialty is the refurbishment of buildings while under occupation.

The Council's plan to move the Podium library to Lewis House and to move office staff from Lewis House to the Podium is courting fiscal failure. It is ill prepared. It will overrun its budgetted spend of £4.4m, will not deliver the promised savings of £800k/year and will fail Bath library users. When senior visitors to the Podium library - with its bus stops nearby - were asked about the move to Manvers Street, they said they would not be able to walk the extra distance.

There are well established principles for value-for-money spending in government procurement. They start with a sound business case based on HM Treasury's Green Book. My FOI request of 10th January asked for sight of the Council's business case. I have not received this. Will the Council open their books on this project, as permitted under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014?

Moving the library without a feasibility study is asking for trouble. Not asking key questions of available experts at this early stage is foolhardy. Ignoring the due consultation process is illegal.

1. Has the council consulted development control on the Podium and Lewis House changes of use? One from office to library. The other from library to office. Will the public object? Is half the current Podium space enough to provide a fit-for-purpose public library?
2. Has the Council had a conversation with the local fire-officer for these changes of use? Are they happy about fire compartmentation at Lewis House and with the means of escape for the forty-three thousand library visitors per month?
3. What do structural, mechanical and electrical engineers say about the technical challenges of punching staircases through floor slabs and threading new services in buildings already in use? Will adequate numbers of library book stacks prove a problem for Lewis House floor loads? Will the Podium need an expensive raised floor to carry new workplace cabling?
4. Has an outline cost plan been prepared? What do construction professionals say about the project management challenges of occupied buildings? Has the removal of asbestos from either building been considered? Will 'green' construction management and 'considerate contractors' be employed?
5. The One-Stop-Shop will need relocating while the work is carried out. Where to? The cost of business disruption will be high. Has this been factored into the spend-to-save equation? There is a police presence in Lewis House. How will this be dealt with?

This is a high-risk venture. In my experience, it will be an expensive job creation scheme for builders, cable installers and office removal firms with library users and taxpayers being the big losers.

The risk of fiscal failure is high. I ask you to vote against a budget that has holes in it; to stop and debate what kind of library service is needed for our World Heritage city. Bath hosts annual literary festivals, has two world-class universities, a high number of library using groups of writers, foreign students, children and senior citizens.