

Thank you Chair and Councillors. My name is Caroline Ambrose. I'm the founder of two literary awards, one of which involves working with young readers whose life chances are closely linked to library services. It's my honour to kick off this debate about Bath Central Library as per the petition begun by library archivist and whistleblower Julie Hazelwood.

Save Bath Libraries would like to take a moment to thank the thousands of residents whose ever growing support has brought us to this point. We know many of you are watching the feed tonight to see what councillors will have to say about the true cost of cutting Bath's library services.

Exactly seven months ago, on a dark Valentine's night, our 5.2k strong petition was presented by schoolboy Alex Lea. Soon afterwards and in good faith a majority of councillors passed the budgeted Modern Libraries Programme savings and costs.

Savings were declared to be £800k and whilst not broken down, councillors were assured cabinet members had gone through them with a fine-toothed comb and were satisfied they were achievable.

Residents were surprised by the £800k as there's no sign of it in The Podium. Total bookstock spend for all B&NES is just £132k per year. Staff costs have fallen for ten years with services supported by unpaid workers. B&NES currently spends less on library staff per resident per year than the price of a single paperback novel. And the rent? It's just £1 a year.

While nationally, less than 1% of LGA spending is on libraries, I challenge you to find a city that spends less on its library than Bath.

When we requested a detailed breakdown of the £800k no one had an answer. Directors told March's Scrutiny Panel there *was* no breakdown or even a business plan. The £800k was an aspiration, an ad hoc savings target they had to meet. Directors further clarified that how much of the savings could or couldn't be achieved would not be fully worked up **after** the final decision to had been made as to do so would look like a waste of public money.

Let's stop and think about that. However well-meaning, the consequences of not making decisions based on solid evidence has never been clearer than in 2017 Bath. Councillors, we need you help B&NES break this pattern of poor decision making that ends in political chaos and wastes public millions.

Because here we are again. Seven months on, and still no concrete evidence for these savings. Costs have gone up, we have an alternative site, still no consultation about co-locating and just 2 library questions. This consultation comes with a lot of documents, but none of them contain the vital information about how that savings target can be guaranteed. Councillors are being asked to make a high risk high stakes gamble with our public millions.

More than ever, councillors need to be fully satisfied about public expenditure decisions. Every financially minded person who looks at these numbers winces. Ernst and Young say information is incomplete.

I've spent much time trying to understand how these plans can be tweaked to deliver. I've read every document, consulted library experts, looked at best practice, funding models and income streams used by other councils and hundreds of library users. Lewis House is evidently disastrous on all counts. And while I've longed to find proof The Podium option might be something we could and should all get behind, the evidence is clear.

Neither option is viable. Both would cost Bath dear. Not just the capital millions, not even just the spurious savings, but the enormous and glaring additional costs seemingly not considered in all these documents. Meanwhile other councils are busy bringing income and funding in as set out by the DCMS. The event room alone could have been generated six figures in income during the time it's been closed, whilst still providing a wide range of free events to inspire, educate and develop skills.

Where is the impact analysis? Strong library services are known to lessen other service costs especially health, welfare, employment whilst strengthening the local economy. And what about the impact on the business community? Moving 500k in footfall away from the very areas where shops and business are already struggling post Southgate will have a big impact. Where is the work on this? For those outside the city, how will your local residents react when millions are spent, savings aren't as billed and the additional costs mean finding ever more services to cut. Residents across the whole of Bath and North East Somerset need all of you to put party lines aside and come together to sort this mess out while there's still time.

Thank you.