

**COUNCILLOR JOHN BULL –
SPEECH TO CABINET ON THE COMMUNITY LIBRARIES CALL-IN**

I am pleased to be here as Chair of the CTE Scrutiny Panel to explain why the Panel asked for the Cabinet decision on branch libraries to be referred back to Cabinet. I am also pleased that you have now allowed members of the public to address this meeting since it was the expressions of concern by library users in these communities that influenced the panel to uphold the call-in. For most members of the Cabinet this will be the first time that they have heard these views expressed due to the lack of consultation on these proposals.

The first recommendation of the Panel concerned this lack of consultation. Unlike in the case of Bath Central Library there was no invitation to the public to tell you-the Cabinet – why they value their local libraries and how horrified they are at the prospect of them closing.

In the case of Paulton, where I have first hand knowledge, there has been no consultation with anyone, except the Parish Council, who have been sworn to secrecy on what BANES officers have told them about the closure of The Hub and conditions under which the PC might take it over. I am a BaNES Councillor for Paulton but not a Parish Councillor and I am still in the dark about what support and funding the PC might get if it agreed to become responsible for the library. Even the timing of the process is unclear; the PC had apparently been working under the assumption that BANES would withdraw its funding in 2018 but in the CTE Panel Cllr Warrington mentioned 2019. Since the PC would have to set up its budget for such a step at least six months in advance this difference is crucial.

As a result most people in Paulton are only now waking up to the fact that they could lose their treasured Hub, which incorporates the library, meeting space and cafe.

The second recommendation is that more work needs to be done to find out the public appetite for volunteers running their local library themselves. Clearly this results from the lack of consultation.

If there has been no public debate (except for the non-specific one two years ago at the local

Forums) what chance is there of finding people or bodies to run the libraries on a voluntary basis?

This is especially important in the case of Bath, where there are no Parish Councils to act as a fall-

back. Many libraries already make use of volunteers as a way of extending their opening hours but that is very different from asking volunteers to manage these libraries – e.g. to order stock, issue books, supervise and maintain IT equipment and deal with the thousand and one issues that might arise each week. Even Parish Councillors are unpaid volunteers, who often have their own day jobs and the paid clerks who are usually part-time have umpteen other responsibilities from recreation grounds to streetlights to dog-fouling.

When challenged on the prospects for branch libraries in Bath being transferred to other bodies Cllr Warrington could only refer to an approach to a ‘teacher from Twerton’ and feelers put out to Help the Aged. (as if only old people use libraries) but this is no foundation for such a massive change. Finally there is the future of the mobile library, which provides a vital service to villages like Peasdown and Clutton, which have never had a branch library. The original report did not make it clear what would happen to the remaining mobile library but at the Panel Cllr Warrington indicated that the service would be definitely be retained. This needs to be set in stone by being recorded in the minutes to this meeting.

And now the Addendum which was published less than 24 hours ago. This has given me very little time to consider it in detail. The statement that the Mobile Library is safe is to be welcomed. However the proposals still fall short of a full consultation. Consultation is apparently to be limited to certain pre-selected groups who might be interested in taking over the branch libraries. If this follows the pattern adopted in the case of Paulton this will consist of financial and other negotiations carried out behind closed doors at the end of which the PC will still have to carry out its own consultation on whether the parishioners are prepared to stump up the additional Council Tax to keep the library open – when they are already paying BANES Council Tax to fund libraries in Bath, Midsomer Norton and Keynsham. There is also a mention of consultation through the Forums – these are not well-publicised and will be ineffective if the proposals put forward are as non-specific as they were last time. The emphasis in the Addendum seems to be on creating new

Community Libraries, run on a shoestring with minimal professional support. At the same time it is proposed to cut-back on existing and thriving branch libraries which serve their communities well – an approach which can only be explained by the urge to cut expenditure rather than improve the library service.