

## **REGENERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**30 JANUARY 2014**

### **PETITIONS**

Report from: Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture

Author: Anthony Law, Democratic Services Officer

#### **Summary**

This report advises the Committee of the petitions presented at Council meetings, received by the council or sent via the e-petition facility, including a summary of officer's response to the petitioners.

#### **1. Budget and Policy Framework**

- 1.1 The Constitution provides that petitions received by the council relating to matters within the remit of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be referred immediately to the relevant Director for consideration at officer level.

#### **2. Background**

- 2.1 The Director is asked to respond to the petition request within 10 working days. The petition organiser may request to refer the matter to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee if s/he is not satisfied with the answer and has given reasons for their dissatisfaction.
- 2.2 If the petition contains at least the number of signatures equating to 5% of Medway's population (currently 12,675 signatures) it will be debated by Full Council unless it is a petition asking for a senior council officer to give evidence at a public meeting.
- 2.3 If the petition contains at least the number of signatures equating to 2% of Medway's population (currently 5,070 signatures) the relevant senior officer may give evidence at a public meeting of the relevant overview and scrutiny committee.

- 2.4 A petition may also be submitted through the e-petition facility on the council's website. E-petitions must follow the same guidelines as paper petitions. A petition acknowledgement and response will be emailed to everyone who has signed the e-petition and elected to receive this information.
- 2.5 A summary of the response to all petitions will also be published on the council's website.

### 3. Petitions

- 3.1 A summary of the response relevant to this Committee, which has passed the ten day deadline for a request for referral to the Committee and is therefore seen as acceptable to the petitioners, is set out below.

<b>Subject of petition</b>	<b>Date of receipt and whether paper or e-petition</b>	<b>Response</b>
Campaign for a mountain bike trail/freeride course within the Medway area	4 December 2013  E-petition	The petitioner has been advised of the mountain bike track at Capstone Country Park and other cycling routes in Medway. The Director has offered to discuss ideas for new facilities with the lead petitioner but advised that this would need to be in the context of the Council's constrained financial position.

### 4. Strood library and Strood Community Project

- 4.1 On 12 December 2013 the Council received two separate petitions both opposing the relocation of Strood Library from Bryant Road, Strood to 133 High Street, Strood:

- The first petition was submitted on the following terms:

“We, the undersigned, believe that Strood’s popular Library should remain on its present large Bryant Rd site and not be moved to a smaller rented retail unit at 133 High St. A town centre Library will have a number of disadvantages – including the loss of free car parking currently provided at the existing site. Additionally the High St Shop is currently used by the Strood Community Project, a local charity that delivers vital services for disadvantaged people of all ages. The loss of the shop is a treat to the continued success of the charity.”

Lead Petitioners: Mrs. Odette Buchanan and Miss. Marion Shoard.

- The second petition was submitted on the following terms:

“We the citizens of Strood oppose the plans to move Strood Library and Community Hub to 133 High Street.

We believe the current library serves the community well and the charity, Strood Community Project, should be given the opportunity to remain at 133 High Street as a retail shop supporting local residents.”

Lead Petitioners: Ms. Kim West and Mr. Paul Robinson.

4.2 Copies of the letters from the Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture responding to these petitions are attached at Appendix A.

4.3 It is noted that one of the original Lead Petitioners for the first petition has subsequently withdrawn their support for the petition. The Lead Petitioners have requested referral to this Committee for the reasons set out below and within the letter attached at Appendix B.

4.3.1 Email from Mrs. Odette Buchanan, dated 4 January 2014, referring to the response from the Director and setting out reasons for requesting that the matter be reviewed by the relevant Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

“Firstly, it refers to a general policy of amalgamating a library and a contact point for several services in each of the Medway Towns. Why should we be subjected to a 'one size fits all' policy? I would point out the unique situation in Strood. In Gillingham, Chatham and Rochester the Hub was created within a building that was already in the centre of town. In none of these cases does the hub occupy what could be retail space, whereas in Strood the Council seek to move a very popular, well designed, purpose built library facility that has ample space to accommodate front line services as well into a large, inconveniently located retail building that will cost many hundreds of thousands of pounds to convert into a hub.

Secondly, in the reply it is pointed out how popular the library is in the present location. It should also be remembered that Strood library serves the Hoo Peninsula, especially school parties. The reply gives no indication as to how such mini-buses or coaches will be accommodated with regards to parking and SAFE perambulation of the children to the library entrance.

Thirdly, you refer to parking - where? The rear access to 133 High Street is down a long alley one vehicle wide with a steep incline where it joins the main road one-way system on a blind corner. On arrival one enters the alley (presumably resurfaced and properly fenced) only to arrive at the rear entrance to find all the parking spaces occupied. Back again and try and re-join the one-way system. Look left for approaching traffic - blind corner often also blocked by illegally parked on double

yellow lines Domino Pizza delivery vans and/or customers + traffic whizzing round (often over the 30 mph limit out of the rush hour) and containing double-decker buses, international-sized lorries, etc. etc. As the police have pointed out 'An accident waiting to happen.' I would suggest that the whole blind corner needs re-aligning and making a third, feeder lane from the access alley.

Fourthly, back to the parking - at present there is no FREE parking in Strood. Where will the library/contact Point staff park? How long will the 'free parking' be for and how will it be monitored to ensure shoppers do not abuse it? How many disabled bays will there be? Where will there be space for the library delivery lorries? Where will there be space for the afore mentioned school parties' buses? How will one exist the alley if another vehicle is entering and vice-versa? Where will all these cars, buses, delivery lorries go on Tuesdays and Saturdays when the adjacent - PAYING - car park is taken over by the very popular market?

Fifthly, consider the totally inappropriate proposed location - no safe pedestrian access even for mobile adults. To reach the entrance from either direction there is a narrow bottle-neck in the pavement from either the pedestrian crossing by the church and the crossing by North Street from the other direction. Wheel-chairs, mobility scooters, buggies, prams, carers with small children, etc. etc. have no easy access.

Sixthly, you have given no rational reason why a hub facility could not be incorporated into the present library building, especially as I understand the caretaker's house is unoccupied and there is land adjacent too.

I look forward to your response and because of the huge upsurge in opposition to this proposal by library users, the residents of Strood and the Strood Centre Forum that represents Strood retailers, I request urgent attention of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee."

#### 4.3.2 Email from Miss. Marion Shoard, dated 9 January 2014:

"I have read Mr Cooper's arguments carefully, but consider that the matter should nonetheless be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny committee.

Mr Cooper points out that at its current site on Bryant Road, Strood library attracts 140,000 visits every year. In other words, it is a highly successful facility where it is. He says that were the facility to be relocated, Strood traders would benefit from the footfall. Yet the Strood Town Centre Forum has been one of the most vociferous critics of your proposed scheme. What are the reasons for this marked difference in view? Does Mr Cooper consider that the Forum's understanding of the scheme is flawed and, if so, in what way?

Mr Cooper mentions in his letter the future location of the Strood Community Project shop. This is an important, but separate matter. The question that must first be addressed is: why should Medway Council

and the businesses and residents who fund its work move a successful, much loved facility somewhere else, and in the process spend money from our housing budget at a time when homelessness in the towns is increasing?

I believe that first and foremost a review should examine whether the existing, successful facility could simply be modified to include a hub facility. I have not seen any report which sets out the size of the hub facility that is proposed for Strood – is it to be as large as the Rochester hub, and if not, precisely what will be its dimensions? Nor have I seen any report on the different ways in which the Bryant Road site might be modified, and the costs that would be involved.

Various possibilities present themselves. One is simply the inclusion of a hub facility in the foyer area, as in Rochester. Another is the creation of space in the first floor/roof area to house the Medway archives, in addition to provision for the hub in the foyer. How does the council's thinking on finding a new site for the archives relate to its thinking about the hub/library? As the results of questions and considerations such as these have not, as far as I am aware, been published, I consider it imperative that another council committee should take a fresh look at the proposal.

Many details require attention, if the facility is to be moved to 133 High Street. Mr Cooper mentions parking in his letter. I assume that the disabled parking spaces to which he refers are for disabled people who arrive by car. Yet many of the disabled people who use the Bryant Road site converge on it with the aid of push walkers, wheelchairs or electric buggies from their homes in the Bryant Road district. How will people with these kinds of mobility aid actually reach the facility and where will those different sorts of aid be parked there?

Not only is the London Road/High Street busy, but crossing it at present is difficult, particularly for people with mobility problems. For instance, the surfacing of the traffic island at the junction of Gun Lane/Cuxton Road and London Road is in an atrocious state. I recently rescued a woman who was stranded on that island with a walker which she could not lift to negotiate the uneven surface. Her various items of shopping in the bag strung across her walker had fallen onto the island in her desperate attempt to cross its surface. As Mr Cooper knows, the provision of ramps and spaces provides easy access for disabled people in the Bryant Road site.

So please ask the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review this matter as soon as possible.”

- 4.4 The Lead Petitioners have been invited to attend the meeting and the Committee will be asked to allow a nominated Lead Petitioner for each petition to address the meeting to explain the concerns being raised.

- 4.5 In accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme the Committee is asked to consider this matter. If the committee does not believe the petition has been dealt with adequately, it may undertake further investigations, make recommendations to the Cabinet or refer the matter for consideration at a meeting of the Full Council.

## **5. Director's Comments**

- 5.1 The Council has a longstanding aspiration to establish Community Hubs in each of our main town centres, as set out in Medway's Cultural Strategy, which was adopted in 2009. Our Community Hub programme is our strategic approach to enhancing our libraries as a highly valued public service, widening the offer available by establishing a gateway to Council services such as Planning, Housing, Benefits and environmental services and using flexible space to enable other public service agencies to operate from under the same roof on a surgery basis, for example Health, Police and Debt Advice.
- 5.2 We have recently opened Gillingham, Chatham and Rochester Community Hubs, and all have received very positive feedback from our customers.
- 5.3 Our proposals for Strood represent significant investment into the High Street, with the benefits of greater convenience for our customers, increased footfall for Strood retailers (approximately 140,000 visits per year at the current site) and the refurbishment of a dilapidated shop, enhancing the High Street environment. The project will bring greater vitality to the town centre and is in keeping with national thinking on the regeneration of our high streets.
- 5.4 The new location will have a larger space for our Children and Family zone, as this is a very popular facility at the current library site. It will also provide a gateway to Council services, have excellent ICT facilities and surgery space for Ward Councillors and other public services.
- 5.5 No detailed feasibility has been undertaken on establishing the Bryant Road site as a Community Hub, as that would be contrary to the Council's stated intention of establishing Community Hubs in High Street locations for the convenience of our customers. This proposed location will enable the existing Contact Point to be moved off the Civic Centre site and be relocated to a far better position to serve our customers.
- 5.6 We have considered customer parking throughout the initial stages of the proposals and there are a number of public car parks near to the new location, as well as it being better served by bus routes in comparison to the existing library site. The Planning Consent includes a condition for the renovation of the rear access road and the provision of parking before which the facility cannot open. This will include disabled and short time, free library parking.

- 5.7 The free parking time limit has not been finalised as yet; however, we are considering 30-minute parking bays for our library customers. We are currently looking at 3 disabled bays to be provided and there will be space in the foyer area of the new building for disabled customers to leave their push walkers, wheelchairs and electric buggies. Parking Attendants will monitor both free and disabled bays and discussions are ongoing around establishing the free parking bays in the Temple Mount Car Park.
- 5.8 Public consultation was part of the planning application process and residents were able to submit objections and concerns, which were considered by the Planning Committee. The current proposals were developed following the demise of the earlier scheme for a Community Hub on the refurbished Tesco's site, which was the subject of considerable consultation at the time and very favourably received.
- 5.9 The current visits from local schools will not be affected. The new location is a short 5-minute walk from the existing library, so the school children located near to the Community Hub will still be able to access the new facilities easily. Should visitors arrive by coach they would be able to park at the retail car park and walk across to the new site.
- 5.10 The Council made an approach to the Landlords of 133 High Street in good faith. This was long before the Strood Community Project moved in. We understand the Strood Community Project only ever occupied the property on a short-term Licence.
- 5.11 The Strood Community Project provides valued support to the community, but the services available through the proposed Community Hub are far wider than those provided by this single charity.
- 5.12 As the project progresses, we will be communicating with Strood residents about the next steps and will ensure that any inconvenience is kept to a minimum in moving to the new location.

## **6. Risk Management**

- 6.1 The Council has a clear scheme for handling petitions set out in its Constitution. This ensures consistency and clarity of process, minimising the risk of complaints about the administration of petitions.

## **7. Financial and Legal Implications**

- 7.1 Any financial and/or legal implications arising from the issues raised by the petitions are set out in the comments on the petitions.

## **8. Recommendation**

- 8.1 Members are requested to note the petition response and officer action as set out in paragraph 3 of the report.

8.2 Members are asked to consider the petition referrals, as outlined in section 4 of the report, and agree either to take no further action or pursue one of the courses of action identified in paragraph 4.5 of the report.

**Background papers**

None.

**Contact for further details:**

Anthony Law, Democratic Services Officer

Tel. No: 01634 332008 Email: [anthony.law@medway.gov.uk](mailto:anthony.law@medway.gov.uk)





Please contact: Leigh Ann Thurgood  
Your ref:  
Our ref: RC/Lat/ME178  
Date: 20 December 2013

Mr Paul Robinson  
Strood Community Project  
123-125 High Street  
Strood  
Rochester  
Kent  
ME2 4TJ

Director's office  
Regeneration, Community and Culture  
Medway Council  
Gun Wharf, Dock Road  
Chatham, Kent ME4 4TR  
(DX56006 STROOD)  
telephone: 01634 331022  
facsimile: 01634 331729  
Minicom (text) 01634 331300  
email: leighann.thurgood@medway.gov.uk

Dear Mr Robinson

### **Petition re Strood Community Project**

Thank you for submitting the petition concerning the relocation of Strood Library from Bryant Road, Strood to 133 High Street, Strood.

The Council has a longstanding aspiration to establish Community Hubs in each of our 5 main town centres, as set out in Medway's Cultural Strategy (published 2009). Our Community Hub programme is our strategic approach to building upon our libraries as a highly valued public service, widening the offer available by establishing a gateway to Council services such as Planning, Housing, Benefits and Environmental services and using flexible space to enable other public service agencies to operate from under the same roof on a surgery basis, for example Health, Police and Debt Advice.

I have noted your reference to the Strood Community Project remaining at 133 High Street for 10 years; whilst this is a matter for the landlord, that is not our understanding of the position. We made an approach in good faith with a proposal to invest over a long period of time in this building to create a new Community Hub facility. This was long before the Strood Community Project moved in; indeed we viewed an empty property.

Once you have considered this response, you may ask for the matter to be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee if you feel that the council has not dealt with your petition properly. You should do this by giving notice to the Head of Democratic Services within 10 days of receiving the response. It would be helpful if you would provide reasons should you decide to request a review.

Yours sincerely

**Robin Cooper**  
Director of Regeneration, Community & Culture



Please contact: Leigh Ann Thurgood  
Your ref:  
Our ref: RC/Lat/ME177  
Date: 20 December 2013



Director's office  
Regeneration, Community and Culture  
Medway Council  
Gun Wharf, Dock Road  
Chatham, Kent ME4 4TR  
(DX56006 STROOD)  
telephone: 01634 331022  
facsimile: 01634 331729  
Minicom (text) 01634 331300  
email: leighann.thurgood@medway.gov.uk

Dear Ms Buchanan

### **Petition re Strood Library**

Thank you for submitting the petition concerning the relocation of Strood Library from Bryant Road, Strood to 133 High Street, Strood.

Before I turn to the specific issues you have raised, I would like to take this opportunity to set out the background to our Community Hub Programme. The Council has a longstanding aspiration to establish Community Hubs in each of our 5 main town centres, as set out in Medway's Cultural Strategy (published 2009). Our Community Hub programme is our strategic approach to building upon our libraries as a highly valued public service, widening the offer available by establishing a gateway to Council services such as Planning, Housing, Benefits and Environmental services and using flexible space to enable other public service agencies to operate from under the same roof on a surgery basis, for example Health, Police and Debt Advice.

We have recently opened Gillingham and Chatham Community Hubs, and both have received very positive feedback from our customers.

Our proposals for Strood represent significant investment into the High Street, with the benefits of greater convenience for our customers, increased footfall for Strood retailers (approximately 140,000 visits per year at the current site) and the refurbishment of a dilapidated shop, enhancing the High Street environment. The project will bring greater vitality to the town centre and is in keeping with national thinking on the regeneration of our High Streets.

The new location will have a larger space for our Children and Family zone, as this is a very popular facility at the current library site. It will also provide a gateway to Council services such as Housing, Benefits advice, Planning and Environmental services with an adult library, ICT facilities and surgery space for Ward Councillors and other public services.

We have considered customer parking throughout the initial stages of the proposals and there are a number of public car parks near to the new location, as well as it being better served by bus routes in comparison to the existing library site. The Planning Consent includes a condition for the renovation of the rear access road and the

provision of parking before which the facility cannot open. This will include disabled and short time, free library parking.

In response to your final point about the building currently being used by the Strood Community Project, we made an approach to the landlord with a proposal to invest over a long period of time in this building to create a new Community Hub facility in good faith. This was before the Strood Community Project had moved in and indeed we looked around an empty building. Although a matter for the landlord, we understand the licence agreement the Strood Community Project has was only ever a short-term proposition.

Once you have considered this response, you may ask for the matter to be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee if you feel that the Council has not dealt with your petition properly. You should do this by giving notice to the Head of Democratic Services within 10 days of receiving the response. It would be helpful if you would provide reasons should you decide to request a review.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely

**Robin Cooper**  
Director of Regeneration, Community & Culture

Strood Community Project



Church and Community Together

*An initiative of the Parishes of St  
Francis of Assisi and St Nicholas with  
St Mary, and Strood Gospel Mission  
Church, Kent*

Strood Community Project Ltd  
123-125 High St  
Strood  
Kent ME2 4TJ

Tel. 01634 298747  
[www.stroodcommunityproject.org.uk](http://www.stroodcommunityproject.org.uk)

## OPEN LETTER

Head of Democratic Services  
Medway Council  
Gun Wharf  
Dock Rd  
Chatham ME4 4TR

2<sup>nd</sup> January 2014

Dear Sir or Madam,

### **Petition submitted by Strood Community Project**

I am writing having received a response from Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community & Culture, to our petition.

Our involvement in the issue of the relocation of the library to 133 Strood High Street is one that has been forced upon us on the strength of local feeling and we feel beholden to take the matter forward in the light of the number of people who have raised the issue.

In his letter of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2013 Mr Cooper suggests that the relocation of the library to the High Street and the formation of the Community Hub is a strategic ambition following the statements in the Medway Cultural Strategy (2009-2014). The references to community Hubs being allied to libraries are merely:

- P9 (...research shows the need to focus on the following:) - developing libraries as Community Hubs
- P21 (We are keen to invest in and develop our libraries...) but this does not mention Strood
- P22 (What we will do) – opening our first library community hub in 2010 and roll out the programme over successive years.

None of this indicates that Strood library needed to be moved or that anything other than the possibility of creating a Community Hub in that library was their ambition. In fact, it was not any part of the strategic priorities listed in the document.

We are not aware of evidence that shows public consultation by Medway Council on the issue but, as far as we are aware, none has been put forward.

This leads us onto the democratic deficit. Fewer and fewer people participate in the political process because they feel their views are never taken in to account. It seems that in the case of the relocation of Strood library, not only was there no consultation with the public regarding the formation of a Strategy, but there has been no engagement with the public with regard to the closure of the present purpose built library and community hall, which an overwhelming number of users regard as an excellent facility. Several petitions in addition to ours have recorded public discontent.

Mr Cooper's letter states that the intention of the Community Hub is to allow the public to access a range of Council facilities and other agencies on a surgery basis, and some examples are given – Health, Police and Debt Advice. Strood Community Project has an Advice Centre two doors down from the proposed Hub at which we offer a range of advice services including welfare benefits, housing, debt and more. Medway Council has never approached us at any time to ensure that there is a collaborative approach and no overlap of service provision. I made this request directly to Richard Hicks at a meeting of Strood Town Centre Forum many weeks ago but nothing has transpired. It is incomprehensible that a Local Authority may set up duplicate services with total disregard to an established local charity no more than 20 yards away, thereby jeopardising its very existence.

Finally a minor matter needs to be corrected: Mr Cooper states that Strood Community Project was intending to stay in 133 High St for 10 years. This has never been our stated ambition whilst we are occupying the premises on a Licence. However, we did approach the landlord with a view to entering into a lease arrangement, but were told that the landlord had commenced negotiations with Medway Council and were therefore not inclined to have discussions with a second prospective tenant.

Yours faithfully,

Paul Robinson  
Chief Executive