

Petitioners' statement to Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee (20 May 2015)

Kent IS its local communities. The 'glue' that sustains these communities must be maintained.

Libraries – as providers of learning, enjoyment, well-being, buffers to isolation and alternatives to relentless consumerism/materialism, as well as essential access to services and opportunities for many of all ages and from every background – are a vital element of this. Our collective investment in a thriving future for Kent, social and economic, is demonstrated by 99 libraries, free and open to all. They are symbols of democracy and belief in a good society.

The population is aging, shared public space/facilities have declined, constant change/updating skills and knowledge is expected, inequality grows, loneliness is exacerbated by the internet; libraries should be developed as community hubs offering a widening range of information and communication based services. KCC has achieved efficiency and cost effectiveness (whilst incorporating registration, internet and other innovations) maintaining high user satisfaction and community support. This shared and democratically-accountable success should not be undermined by 'privatisation'.

The 'Trust' consultation understated risks and was ambiguous about 'independence'. It hid the extra costs of a trust (and KCC's monitoring/compliance), falsely suggested a trust would easily raise new money (which for a basic service it would not) and misled about increased public influence (nothing about 'how' or the loss of our current democratic representation). Cllr Mike Hill acknowledged (Gazette, 18.09.14) "*it will be a matter for the Trust whether it wants to maintain Kent's 99 libraries*"; yet this was not reflected in the tone or substance of the proposal on which residents were invited to comment.

The 'Save our public libraries' petition offered precise statements. The unusual ease of gathering signatures (in the necessarily- limited number of face-to face situations it could be offered) revealed VERY high public support. If offered in every library as part of the consultation, its pro-KCC message to continue its responsibility/running of the library service and avoid cuts and closures would have been overwhelming. Local people didn't agree with the consultation document that losing 'public' resources (developed/paid for by many generations) is an insignificant change. The most common response was 'It's the thin end of a wedge'.

Despite requests, no actual examples have been given/found (up to submission) of positive examples of trusts that are even responsible for a comparable service (ie 99 libraries spread across a large county) let alone any that have gained approval from users and communities for cost-effectiveness, efficiency and customer satisfaction close to that achieved to date by KCC.

KCC gave assurances that the consultation preceded any decision. The Committee is asked to show it has listened by RECOMMENDING that:

- I. the petition statements are adopted by KCC as criteria against which any proposal is evaluated;
- II. as libraries are local to every KCC councillor, any final proposal is subject to a public agenda debate in full council;
- III. use of reserves (or reductions in continuing payments into reserves) is considered to avoid cuts to the library service;

IV. no 'privatisation' of Kent's much-valued public library service is undertaken prior to it being 'tested' in 2017 election manifestos.