

Call-in Request for Executive Decision 25/00104 - Future of Library provision in Folkestone town centre

**Call-in request submitted by:** Mr Prater, Mr Hood, Mr Brady, Ms Hudson, Mr Hook, Mr Samme and Mr Sefton.

**Reasons for calling in the decision:**

**Reason one: 8.5 Due consultation**

The consultation feedback from users of the Grace Hill Library made clear that more than half of respondents disagreed with leaving the Grace Hill building for an alternative town centre location. Many consultees expressed a strong preference for repairing and retaining the existing building, and several specifically referenced Creative Folkestone when outlining their views. This decision raises serious concerns about the value and purpose of conducting a consultation if the Council chooses to proceed with a decision that appears to disregard or directly contradict the views of residents and local representatives.

Under the Council's Best Value obligations, the Council is required to 'take account of feedback from citizens and service users', and ensure that service delivery is evidence-based, customer and citizen focused.<sup>1</sup> Public interest in keeping the library at Grace Hill is further reflected in the EQIA, which shows that between April and November 2022, Folkestone Library had the highest visitor numbers in the area, attracting 50,675 residents—significantly more than Hythe, which ranked the second-highest, with 38,399 visitors. As the Best Value Duty requires consideration for 'efficiency and effectiveness,' it is reductive to interpret best value solely in financial terms, this duty should also focus on maximising public benefit. Consultation responses, petitions, strong community engagement, and the objections raised by Folkestone's MP Tony Vaughan demonstrate that the Grace Hill building holds substantial value for the community. If a solution could be found to retain the building as a library, whether operated by KCC or an alternative provider, this would more accurately reflect the Best Value principles.

The decision taken does not meaningfully consider the consultation or other methods of evaluating the Council's Best Value duty. The approach taken for this decision gives the impression of a predetermined decision, undermining the voices of Kent residents. For these reasons, the decision should be subject to further scrutiny, ensuring Members have a genuine opportunity to consider and respond to the consultation findings.

**Reason two: 8.5 A presumption in favour of openness and an explanation of the options considered and giving reasons for decisions.**

The decision report for Decision 25/00104 does not include the reserve auction price for Grace Hill building and despite direct requests, this information has not been made available to Members through either public, exempt papers, or discussions. Members must be provided the full financial information for this decision, as the Council's budget is a collective responsibility and meaningful scrutiny cannot be provided for decisions when essential cost information is withheld. Additionally, this decision has not been considered by the Policy and Resources Committee, which implies that the proposed auction reserve price for this Grade II listed building is below £1 million. An explanation and evidence of this

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<sup>1</sup> Gov.UK (8<sup>th</sup> May 2024), 'Best value standards and intervention: a statutory guide for best value authorities'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-value-standards-and-intervention-a-statutory-guide-for-best-value-authorities/best-value-standards-and-intervention-a-statutory-guide-for-best-value-authorities#defining-best-value>

evaluation must be provided to Members, particularly as an urgent decision was recently required for the disposal of the former Gravesend Adult Education Centre. This was due to this building exceeding the auction reserve price and selling for £1,523,000. The lack of clarity regarding the valuation of Grace Hill, including the reserve price and the methodology used to determine these evaluations, creates a real risk of repeating the same errors. A conservative reserve price, combined with insufficient scrutiny due to a lack of information, could once again necessitate an urgent decision which could undermine confidence in the Council's asset disposal processes. Given the building's importance to the Folkestone community, Members must ensure that such mistakes are not repeated and that no decision to sell is made until all relevant information is available and fully justified.

Further clarity is also required regarding the decision to operate from 14 Sandgate Road. While the report emphasises the financial challenges of remaining at Grace Hill, it fails to provide a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the full costs of operating from 14 Sandgate Road. This is particularly important as Grace Hill is a centrally located Grade II listed building, which if repaired could provide a stronger long-term financial investment for the Council. This comparative information should be presented to Members for consideration to provide confidence in both the decision and the decision-making process for Members and Kent residents. This is particularly important following the recent announcement by the Culture Secretary that funding will be available for cultural organisations to save them from closure and to restore national pride in community assets. Included in this funding is £27.5 million allocated for Libraries Improvement Fund which supports public libraries to upgrade their buildings, and £75 million which provides grants towards the repairs and conservation of historic buildings.<sup>2</sup> To dispose of an asset without fully exploring the potential of grant funding does not demonstrate best value for the Kent taxpayer, especially as this could improve the assets worth.

Within the decision report, Option 2A is highlighted as being in line with the consultation feedback, with some respondents specifically referring to Creative Folkestone. This report acknowledges that this option remains subject to ongoing engagement, and that Creative Folkestone has expressed a willingness to enter a legal arrangement that would end the Council's responsibility for repairs and maintenance. Furthermore, exploring Option 2A is complimentary to decisions taken to date as 14 Sandgate Road has only been leased and has a 5-year break clause on commercial terms. If an agreement could be reached to retain and refurbish Grace Hill at no cost to KCC, the library service could return to the site in 2030, with long-term costs agreed in advance. This would provide certainty and protect against future market cost fluctuations. Therefore, engaging further with Option 2A could financially benefit the Council while also meeting the clear preferences of the Folkestone residents who use this service.

This option should also be explored further as it is clear from the option appraisal that not all the necessary information was requested or obtained from Creative Folkestone to allow for a full assessment. Despite Creative Folkestone's proactive efforts to engage, KCC did not take meaningful steps to discuss or negotiate key aspects of the community bid, including the terms, lease arrangements, peppercorn provisions, or associated liabilities. The paperwork provided for this decision does not demonstrate that Creative Folkestone could not lease the building, only that insufficient information was gathered to make an informed judgement. The potential of Option 2A was not thoroughly investigated. Moreover, Creative Folkestone was the sole respondent when the building was marketed, and there

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<sup>2</sup> GOV.UK (21<sup>st</sup> January 2026), *Government announces bumper £1.5 billion package to restore national pride*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-bumper-15-billion-package-to-restore-national-pride>

appears to be no reasonable justification why further discussion and engagement could not have taken place before its dismissal. In spite of the verbal reassurances provided in Growth, Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee and commitments made by KCC to Creative Folkestone and the individuals involved in the bid, there has been limited contact by KCC with Creative Folkestone, the District Council and the local MP following the ACV bid process. Members need assurance that the Council has meaningfully explored all possibilities with Creative Folkestone and their One Folkestone community partners, especially as their proposal made clear their desire to reach an agreement with the Council which would best meet the needs of the Council and the community.

Additionally, we understand that Folkestone Town Council has recently submitted a bid to purchase Grace Hill for a nominal sum, which would relieve KCC of the ongoing costs associated with maintaining the building. This represents new information that is not contained within the decision report and has not yet been fully considered. It is therefore necessary to pause the decision until all potential options, including this one, have been thoroughly explored and discussed.

Overall, this decision is unsafe and characterised by significant uncertainty as key financial details are absent, and the documentation indicates that KCC has not gathered or provided adequate information to make a confident decision. For these reasons, the decision should not proceed without further scrutiny, more complete information provided, and renewed efforts to explore viable alternatives that align with both community priorities and the Council's financial responsibilities.

**Desired outcome of this call-in:**

We request that the Scrutiny Committee recommends that the implementation of the decision be postponed pending review or scrutiny of the matter by the full Council.