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**HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL – LIBRARY SERVICE CONSULTATION 2020**

Please find below Fair Oak & Horton Heath Parish Council’s formal response to the above consultation. In drafting its response, the Parish Council has considered the consultation document, regional statistics and the Commission of Inquiry – Vision for Hampshire 2020 documents.

The Council would like to remind the County of its legal obligation under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964. We believe that proposals within the consultation document falls short of the requirements of the Act.

The Parish Council will demonstrate below how the rationale to close Fair Oak Library is fundamentally flawed. This local library is highly valued by our local community and the closure would have a negative impact in several ways: on children; on the physical, mental and emotional health of residents: on lifelong learning: and community cohesion and inclusivity; and on local economics.

The County is obliged by law to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. Meaning that the library services need to be accessible to anyone and everyone regardless of the user’s income, socio-economic background, level of education, gender, race, age, mobility and a myriad factors and their resources should cover their geographic area efficiently regardless of the area’s size. In the consultation document, it suggests that with the closure of Fair Oak, residents would be able to access the services of other nearby libraries (Winchester, Eastleigh and Bishops Waltham). These libraries are only accessible to a limited section of the community. The alternative locations pose an immediate barrier to residents on limited incomes and those most vulnerable with complex needs who would have difficulties travelling to these alternative locations. Winchester, Eastleigh and Bishops Waltham are not local to Fair Oak residents who have no affinity to these areas.

Whilst the document highlights that Fair Oak is not a deprived area, scoring 9.1 out of 10 in the IMD index (10 being the least deprived), the Parish is aware of that there are those living in the area with limited incomes. There are children from lower income families in the village whose only access to free books is the local library. The Literacy Trust widely reports that children who do not have access to books or a desk at home are more likely to struggle with reading. The local library provides a safe space where children can overcome barriers through free access to books, computers and the internet. Closing the library would have a negative impact upon the development of children with the Parish. With more and more school libraries closing, children from lower income families will be put at a disadvantage ultimately impacting on their learning, skills and limiting their options for the future.

The consultation document highlights the low number of visits to the library. And states that the footfall figures include all visitors not just library members borrowing books. What is not acknowledged is that the significantly reduced opening hours and obvious lack of investment in the library has had a direct impact on this. Library services should be fully accessible to all users when they require it, with opening hours that meet the needs of working people and children’s groups. Reducing library opening hours in a bid to save money has a direct impact on usage, a library is not going to be used more if it is open less. The Parish Council would ask the County whether it has adequately promoted and invested in Fair Oak library to avoid such a closure?

The data used for informing the County’s rationale does not seem to consider future developments in the Parish. Fair Oak will be developing considerably in future months and years. Eastleigh Borough Council’s local plan has identified their Strategic Options Site in Fair Oak with an estimated 5,500 dwellings. Current developments taking place include in excess of 500 dwellings in addition to an estimated 2,000 dwelling development in Horton Heath.

It is fair to say that significant growth in the population of the Parish, increasing far greater than that of any other Parish in the Borough and indeed Hampshire’s average growth rate will have a significant impact on the need for library provision.

Furthermore, the consultation document does not acknowledge how important the library is for the health and wellbeing of residents and how it supports the community. The library is a hugely important local resource for residents which plays host to several popular free community groups and events all of which are invaluable particularly to our most vulnerable residents. These groups and events have a positive impact on social inclusion and community cohesion. The increasing number of cuts to public services has meant that vulnerable people are often set adrift and, in many areas, the only thing that remains open to them is the library. The library staff in Fair Oak provide informal mental and wellbeing support to elderly, vulnerable and isolated individuals. The essential role this library plays in promoting the general wellbeing of the community and its citizens is not acknowledged in the County’s document.

When examining the issue of equality, the decision to close the library will clearly have an impact on groups with protected characteristics: older and younger people and people with mobility, cognitive and other disabilities. The County must carefully consider decisions and impact on these groups. Particularly when the annual saving suggested (£37,000) is a drop in the ocean in the wider context of the County’s overall budget.

The rationale for closure of Fair Oak library (and other libraries across Hampshire) are in direct conflict of the strategic priorities of HCC, more specifically the climate emergency declaration made in June 19 and the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry – Vision for Hampshire 2020. By suggesting that the local service be removed and residents travel (by car or bus) would only increase the Fair Oak’s carbon emissions.

Furthermore, HCC’s Commission of Inquiry document states that “Communities that are connected, diverse, sustainable and happy are the cornerstone of a thriving, equitable and prosperous society, placing people at the centre so a culture of resilience and self-help can be nurtured.” The proposal to close Fair Oak library is in complete contradiction to this. Once this essential community hub is lost it is lost forever.

The consultation document in recognising the importance of local libraries to the local community states that it would welcome approaches from organisations. In that vein and in seeking to support, enable and empower our local community to be more resilient, the Parish Council asks the County Council to consider the following options:

1. That there be no closure;
2. That reduced opening hours be applied, condensed into full days, with rest of the building being available for hire by community groups for the provision of community activities (the Parish Council would offer support of bookings management), providing rent to the County to offset the annual expenditure on the service provision;
3. That the County either gifts the building to the Parish Council/or leases the building at a peppercorn rent, including existing stock, allowing the Parish Council to provide an alternative library model;
4. That alternative funding options be explored; and
5. That the library be co-located within an existing centralised community building.

The Parish Council requests that the above options be considered fully prior to any final decision being made and that open dialogue take place between both authorities to explore the feasibility of the options provided.