

CASTLEREAGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of the proceedings of the Special Council Meeting held, in the Council Chamber, Civic & Administrative Offices, Bradford Court, Upper Galwally, Castlereagh, BT8 6RB on Monday, 16 January 2006 at 3.15 p.m.

PRESENT: Alderman Mrs Rice
(in the Chair)

ALDERMAN: P D Robinson MP MLA (from 4.05 p.m.)

COUNCILLORS: Mrs A M Beattie (from 3.50 p.m.)
J Beattie (from 3.50 p.m.)
Ms J Bunting
Mrs M Chambers
Mrs S Duncan
C Hall
Miss R Hughes MBE
G Robinson
C Tosh
J Spratt

APOLOGIES: Apologies were received on behalf of Aldermen Mrs Robinson, Copeland, Norris and Councillors Jeffers, Hanvey, Long, Drysdale and Cochrane.

IN ATTENDANCE: Alistair McDonnell MP, Director of Administration & Community Services and Assistant Members' Services Officer

2006/01 : DISCUSSION PERTAINING TO POTENTIAL CLOSURE OF LIBRARIES IN THE BOROUGH

Alderman Rice welcomed Mr Alisdair McDonnell MP to the meeting.

Councillor Ms Bunting advised Members that she and Alderman Peter Robinson had attended a meeting of the South Eastern Education & Library Board Library Committee the previous Friday. She added that at least 5 libraries in the Borough were facing potential closure, 4 of which were located in working class housing estates. She commented that she and Alderman Robinson had attended the meeting in order to raise a number of important issues that the Board needed to be aware before the review of library facilities was finalised. She advised Members that, Alderman P Robinson had attended in his capacity as MP, and she had attended as she had been Mayor when this issue had first come to light.

She added that Alderman Peter Robinson had explained the geographic nature of the Borough, and the difficulties facing residents due to the current transportation system, in that, bus routes went directly into the city centre, and not across the Borough. As a result, residents had overwhelmingly expressed concern, and were of the view that it would be preferable to have local libraries with localised services,

rather than having to travel to a state of the art library at a distant location. This was of particular concern to elderly people and young mothers with children, as having to get a number of buses would present a major problem. She stated that Alderman Robinson had outlined extremely well the unique circumstances in Castlereagh and the transport difficulties of travelling across the Borough.

She added that the Board officials had also stated that they were looking at reduced opening hours, use of part time staff, etc. She stated that as the Board based its statistics on the number of book borrowers, rather than considering users of all the services that libraries provided, it concerned her that reduced opening hours would automatically lead to lower usage, and further closures by stealth.

Councillor Bunting reported that every aspect of this issue previously discussed by Members at Council had been raised at the meeting, and that she and Alderman Robinson had been given a fair hearing, and had felt it had been a very productive meeting.

She expressed the view that, whilst previous isolated campaigns had been important, it was imperative for the Council to establish a strategy in order that both the Elected Representatives and ratepayers were in a position to protest in all areas of the Borough, if need be. She added that it was therefore vital for the Council as a body to unite, rather than possibly jeopardising provision by lobbying in their own particular electoral areas.

Councillor Tosh paid tribute to Alderman Peter Robinson and Councillor Bunting for the eloquent way in which they had put the Council's case forward, in terms of the geographic nature of the Borough, and the current transportation system. He added that based on the information they had provided, the Board had agreed to carry out another assessment of provision in respect of the key libraries under threat.

He added that with the closure of the Health Centres at Belvoir and Braniel, there was room to expand these libraries, and Board officials had advised that this would cost £500,000.00 for each library, although they could not justify to him where they got their figures from. He added that Cregagh and Newtownbreda libraries would be retained, but there were particular problems with Gilnahirk Library. He outlined that the Board were still considering the provision of a state of the art library at Forestside, which he understood would cost in the region of £2.5 million.

Councillor Spratt expressed the view that the closure of libraries was merely a cost cutting exercise, due to the serious financial difficulties the SEELB had found itself in as a result of years of overspend.

He explained that the costs involved in any new build came from a different budget within the Department, but that the expansion costs relating to Belvoir and Braniel would come from existing budgets. He added that as Newtownbreda library was not one of the libraries specifically mentioned in Board briefing papers, it would appear that there was any current threat of closure. He outlined that there was, however, a particular problem with the Gilnahirk library, in that, there was no wheelchair access and it had a low throughput.

Councillor Spratt outlined that it would appear that good progress had been made at the meeting, and Board officials had accepted that they needed to carry out a further assessment.

He called for total cross party support in order to put pressure on the SEELB to retain these local libraries. He added that there was more to a library than just books, as libraries were often the heart of a community where public meetings, community events, exhibitions, etc were held. He stated that he was pleased to see Alisdair McDonnell MP supporting the Council's efforts to save these local libraries.

Mr McDonnell MP outlined that he had been pleased to be invited along to the meeting. He added that he was pleased to provide any assistance he could, and expressed the importance of cross party solidarity in dealing with this matter.

Alderman Rice thanked Mr McDonnell, and advised him that he would be contacted when the Council had made a decision on how the matter should be progressed.

Councillor Hall stated that he had been a member of the Board's Library Committee for six years, and the issue of library closures had never been discussed. He added that it appeared to him that this decision had been taken by the Chief Librarian and not the Board.

Councillors Mrs Beattie and Mr Beattie arrived at the meeting at this point at 3.50 p.m.

Councillor Chambers stated that she could find no rationale behind the decision to close local libraries, other than a cost cutting exercise by the SEELB. She added that she was pleased that there was no present threat to Newtownbreda library, but she felt that this needed to be monitored.

Councillor Duncan reported that she had spoken with the librarians at Newtownbreda library, who felt there was a real threat of closure, as they had been advised that there was no room for expansion. She added that on a recent visit to libraries in the Borough, it had been noted that the bank adjacent to Newtownbreda library was up for sale, making expansion possible if the money was available.

She then referred to the White Paper entitled "NI Libraries a Framework for Change" and noted that a response was required by 31st January 2006.

Councillor Bunting stated that she had been delegated to respond to the document on behalf of the Council.

Alderman Peter Robinson arrived at this point at 4.05 p.m.

Alderman Peter Robinson outlined that in order to respond properly to the issue of libraries, he felt it was necessary to consider the Board's current serious financial constraints. He outlined that it was the Board's view that rather than have a string

of libraries located in areas across the carriageway, i.e. Cregagh, Braniel, Belvoir, Newtownbreda, and Gilnahirk, that a state of the art library be provided with a much wider range of services for the consumer.

Alderman Peter Robinson stated that it had to be recognised that for the Council to say that all libraries should remain open would not be a realistic option for the Board. He outlined that it was clear, however, that the Board did not understand the demography of Castlereagh, and the difficulties these new proposals would cause residents due to the current public transportation system.

He indicated that realistically there may be some form of rationalisation required. He was of the view that it would be better for the Council to bring forward meaningful proposals, in order to meet the needs of the local communities involved, and achievable for the Board.

He stated that, unlike Lisburn, Ards and North Down, Castlereagh did not have a city centre, and the various housing estates within the Borough were not connected by a bus service. He added that the new proposals being put forward by the Board would result in residents having to get a bus into the city centre, and another to the library, which in some cases could take hours. He added that given the cost of fares, and the fact that parents would not feel it was safe for their children to travel such a distance, the Board was certainly not encouraging use of its libraries.

Alderman Robinson advised Members that it had been a very worthwhile meeting, and had provided the Council with an opportunity to have an input into the Board's decision.

Alderman Rice outlined that having listened to the debate, it was clear that all the political parties on the Council needed to work together in order to draw up concrete and realistic proposals to put to the Board.

Alderman Peter Robinson proposed that a Working Group be set up, based on the usual Party Political breakdown, and that A McDonnell MP be invited to participate. He added that it may be worthwhile asking if the SEELB would like to have an Officer attend the meetings, as this would enable that Officer to supply figures and relay the Council's thinking to other officials on the Board. He suggested that staff and users of the libraries in question be asked to provide their views.

Councillor Spratt seconded the proposal.

RESOLVED : That the Council agree

- (a) that a Working Group be set up in order to put together proposals for consideration by SEELB in its re-assessment of library provision in Castlereagh, with various interested parties being invited to attend the meetings, i.e. A McDonnell MP, SEELB Official and staff and users of the relevant libraries. Party Whips to forward Members' names.
- (b) that the Working Group also consider an action plan for the Borough, should it be necessary to organise a campaign against library closures

- (c) Party Whips to forward the names of the Members to sit on the Working Group, on the usual Party Political breakdown of

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 4.30 p.m.

CHAIRMAN

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Adopted by the Council this _____ day of

_____ 2006 with the exception of

Minute Nos: _____

MAYOR

CHIEF EXECUTIVE