

MORETONHAMPSTEAD PARISH COUNCIL

Second report by the Bowring Library Working Group on the location of the library service and the sustainability of the library building, for the MPC meeting on 3 November.

1. A sustainable future for the Bowring Library building in public ownership.

In our last report, we concluded that there probably could be a sustainable future for the building in public ownership with the ground floor in continued use as a library, but that there were a number of difficulties and uncertainties. In particular it depended on:

- a: transfer of the building from DCC (Devon County Council) to a suitable charitable entity, and
- b: finding funding to repair the building and make the upper floors rentable in a form likely to generate enough income to provide for future maintenance needs.

As things stand, both are problematic – DCC are seeking to impose conditions (see last report) on transfer which are hard to meet, it is proving hard to find or create a charitable entity willing to accept and manage the building, we don't as yet have offers of the start-up funding that would be needed, and DNPA (the Dartmoor National Park Authority) have made it clear that they are unlikely to give consent to any application to convert the upper floors to residential use, which appears to be the best way for the building to earn enough income for maintenance needs.

None of these difficulties appears insurmountable – DCC's and DNPA's positions appear not entirely reasonable and so open to question and change, and offers of enough funding would probably make it reasonably easy to find or set up a suitable charitable body – but in combination they appear hard to overcome. The best hope of breaking the logjam would appear to be finding a firm offer of enough start-up funding – the amount needed is estimated at a little below £150K, but we don't at this point have any assurance that this can be achieved. .

2. An alternative option for library provision in Moretonhampstead.

DCC's views that library provision should be moved to the Green Hill Arts Centre, which, they suggest, would make the savings they need while at the same time allowing the library to open for longer hours, providing an improved service

A proposal and drawings (Attachments 1-3) set out the arrangements that MDT (the Moretonhampstead Development Trust) proposes following discussions with DCC: the library would be moved to a room in the ground floor of Green Hill which is currently used by the Youth Club, with mobile shelving that would allow continued use by the Youth Club of part of that space. While this would provide significantly less library space than is currently provided by the ground floor of the Bowring Library, DCC and MDT suggest that this would be offset by potential for longer hours of access to the library, that the pattern of library use is changing in a way that makes shelf space less important, and that there would be beneficial synergies as a result of moving the library to Green Hill.

These plans have not yet been fully worked through – there is as yet no firm offer of funding by DCC, and FoML (the Friends of Moreton Library) and MAY (Moretonhampstead Association for Youth) haven't yet discussed and commented on their benefits and any negative impacts. Time is however pressing: DCC's present oral offer to MDT may depend on being able to put any new arrangements in place by 1 April, which, given the need for some building works at Green Hill, appears hard to achieve unless MPC have decided whether to support this proposal by the time of its January meeting. Otherwise, it has been suggested, Moretonhampstead may risk losing library provision altogether.

If the library is moved to Green Hill, DCC would plan to sell the library building. Initial legal advice (Attachment 4) is that they have the right to do this even though this appears to run counter to the expressed wishes of the Bowring family at the time the building was given to the town, and that Moretonhampstead . A member of the Bowring family has offered us £2K which could be used for getting further legal advice; this may however not be a good use of money.

3. Need for and form of consultation.

In view of the affection of many Moretonians for the library building and its loss as a public building if the library is moved to Green Hill as currently proposed by DCC and MDT, it is clearly important for MPC to consult the community about the change, and to give time and opportunity for anyone who wishes to keep the building in public use and ownership to come forward with alternative proposals. As it is suggested that a decision is needed by early January, we suggest that information and invitations to comment should be put onto the website by 20 November at the latest and published in the December edition of News in Moreton, for response by the end of December; and also that we ask the Mid-Devon Advertiser to run a story on the issue.

The largest immediate difficulty is that MDT has as yet no solid offer from DCC of funding for the move – both capital funding to pay for set-up costs and running funding to pay rent and services costs at Green Hill. We hope that a solid offer will be forthcoming before 20 November; without this assurance it would be more difficult to go out to consultation, and it may be better, despite time pressures, to wait.

We emphasise that the working group neither supports nor resists the proposed move at this stage – we would in principle like to keep the Bowring Library in public ownership and use as a library, but we recognise the problems that exist, and see that a move may have some benefits as well as problems, and may be the best available option.

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