

Note of meeting between representatives of Bowring Library Working Group, Friends of Moretonhampstead Library and Devon County Council to discuss the future of the Bowring Library and the library service in Moretonhampstead, held in The Bowring Library, 10:00-12:00 Wednesday 19 August 2015

[Note: These notes are not intended as full minutes, but as an agreed note setting out and to some extent explaining the positions of the different parties.]

Present at meeting: for Charlotte Reynolds (DCC Estates Services), Jill Currie and Liz Alexander (DCC Library Services), Diane Helmore (DCC Community Liaison), Jane Bowes (Friends of Moretonhampstead Library and Bowring Library Working Group[BLWG]), Bas Payne (Moretonhampstead Parish Council / Bowring Library Working Group).

Initial updates:

BLWG: BP described the setting up of the BLWG and outlined its terms of reference. He said that the BLWG's view was that there could be a sustainable future for the building keeping the library in the ground floor with two flats above it, but that DNPA had indicated that they were at present unlikely to give PP for residential use. He said that the group thought that there might be a sustainable future keeping the library in the ground floor with offices above, if the offices and stairs were redecorated to a good standard, but that demand for these offices was uncertain. He said that BLWG hoped to find a suitable charitable body to do this, with the intention of using funding from a member of the Bowring family (who have said that he intends to help) to pay for external repair and redecoration (probably £20-30K) and, if Bowring support stretches to it, internal redecoration to the upper floors, then trying to let the offices, applying to HLF for further funding for interior redecoration and repair, and, if tenants cannot be found for the offices, then applying for PP for residential use, which is more likely to be given if potential for office use has been fully tested.

CR questioned the realism of these plans. BP said that one problem in looking at options had been uncertainty about DCC's likely terms for transfer and future support for the library service, and that the main purpose of this meeting was to get a better understanding of DCC's position.

FoML: JB described FoML's plans to improve the library service in Moretonhampstead by volunteer opening, especially with the use of a self-service machine.

LA said that it was very unlikely that the level of use at Moretonhampstead would justify a self-service machine, but that the new computer system, likely to be introduced in November, could achieve the same goal of making it possible to open the library without a librarian being present and thus increase opening hours. She suggested that if the library moved to Green Hill, it could be open whenever Green Hill was open, providing much more access.

DCC: LA said that plans to move the library service to be run by a community-owned mutual (a charitable company limited by guarantee) were under way and the target start date was 1 April 2016. She said that it was intended that Friends' Groups would be represented by an elected representative on the Board of Governors.

CR set out the DCC approach to properties. DCC have many properties and they are expensive to run. They wish to separate services from buildings, and reduce property ownership and costs. She said that 6 hours library opening was poor use of the building and unsustainable, especially as Green Hill has space and has been transferred by DCC to the community. While DCC Estates have no particular view on the location of the Library, transfer of the library service to Green Hill would seem to be the most logical solution as it would provide more hours of library access and synergy with other community services. LA was asked to clarify who would make the final decision on location, particularly in the face of two competing community offers. DH said that the community should be consulted throughout the process, whichever option is selected.

BP said that he understood that DCC's retention of ownership of Green Hill created some problems for Green Hill; CR said that DCC are willing to transfer freehold to Green Hill.

Alternative locations for the library:

Green Hill (see also above – already raised). BP and JB said that transfer of the library to the space currently used by the Youth Club would have negative impacts on the Youth Club. CR disagreed, saying that they could work well together. LA said that the reduced space available at Green Hill for the library function wasn't viewed as a problem because books would be part of a larger mix of library services on offer, and that the traditional role of libraries was changing.

Community Club: JB outlined a possible plan to extend the building to provide space for the Community Club function and for the library. However ownership is uncertain; CR said that the mechanism available to create ownership would take 12 years, which, she felt, ruled this out as an option.

DCC's asset transfer policy / terms:

BP asked about the willingness of DCC to transfer ownership of the Bowring Library building to Moretonhampstead, and the terms of any transfer.

CR said that it should be understood

that transfer would need a sound sustainable business case, and could only be made to an organisation with broadly-based community objectives, e.g. MPC or MDT, and not to a library trust.

that transfer would be subject to covenants including the continued provision of broadly-based community benefit – which office or residential use of the upper floors would not satisfy, and that 6-10 hours of library use was poor use of the ground floor; and that this would need to be additional to what

already existed, and should not undermine Green Hill. DH suggested that it would be helpful to map out who does what currently in Moretonhampstead – a “spider of activities”.

that the building would be transferred as is, without any dowry or future DCC liability – “caveat emptor”.

that a “overage” covenant would also be imposed securing for DCC part of any increase in value created by change in planning permission or use (e.g. if sold to Tesco).

DCC future support for the library:

CR said that DCC would expect to negotiate a lease agreement for whatever location was decided on **with a peppercorn rent**, but with reasonable payments for the “cost of being there” – e.g. heating, rates (if any), cleaning, caretaking, and day-to-day maintenance including redecoration of the space used, and a pro-rated contribution to costs incurred as a public building (e.g. Legionella testing) ...

Other:

CR said that it is DCC’s view that the covenants in the Bowring 1902 indenture are unenforceable.

CR said that if DCC sell the building now, they would retain all the proceeds for DCC’s general purposes – it would not be ringfenced for library spending, and no share would pass to Moretonhampstead. BP commented that an initial reading of the 1902 and 1962 documents suggested that proceeds of sale should probably pass to Moretonhampstead.

It was agreed that this had been a helpful exchange of information and clarification of some uncertainties; and that BP would try to prepare a summary for agreement by all present.