

Essex Future Library Services Strategy: Information for Councils and Community Groups

Save Our Libraries Essex (SOLE)

Background

Essex County Council (ECC) has recently revised their strategy for the future of library services in Essex. Local Councils will likely be aware that libraries are a statutory service, and as a local authority Essex County Council has a duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons' in the area that want to make use of it, and to promote library use.¹

Initially in the draft strategy, the county's 74 libraries were divided into four tiers. Those locations in Tier 3 and 4 were assessed as "not required to meet ECC's statutory duty".² Essex County Council has now abandoned its tiering, however it remains committed to handing libraries over to groups of volunteers to run. SOLE understands councils and groups have made Expressions of Interest (EOIs) to run what Essex County Council is calling "community libraries".

When the revised strategy was announced, Council Leader David Finch said "no library will close in the next five years. Essex County Council has also stated that they will not force any library to become a "community library".³

"I'm very clear that the library service will continue; that we will continue to operate the library service, with and/or without volunteers." Councillor David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council.⁴

¹ Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport, 'Libraries as a Statutory Service' (2019) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-libraries-as-a-statutory-service/libraries-as-a-statutory-service>

² Essex County Council, 'Essex Future Library Services Strategy 2019-2024' (2019) [4 App 3 FLS Strategy 2019-2024 scan](#)

³ Leaders Executive Statement July 19 (2019) [Leaders Executive Statement July 19](#)

⁴ Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee (2019) <https://cmis.essex.gov.uk/essexcmis5/CalendarofMeetings/tabid/73/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/410/Meeting/4340/Committee/129/SelectedTab/Documents/Default.aspx>

Therefore under the revised strategy, there is no need for any group to come forward to run a library to prevent its closure. Essex County Council will continue to run those libraries where no groups have come forward, and where groups remove their expression of interest (EOI). Indeed a recent report in the *Guardian* demonstrated that community groups in Essex are already withdrawing their EOIs, "claiming that the council has publicly misrepresented their requests for more information as support for the controversial plans."⁵

Save Our Libraries Essex (SOLE) is non-political group of Essex residents campaigning to protect the county's library service. SOLE members believe that the revised strategy would in fact leave ECC failing in their statutory duty, for the following reasons:

1. Concentrating library provision on a small number of "hub" locations would make it impossible for many Essex residents to get to a library. The strategy fails to take into account the nature of our communities, and the available transport options.
2. Cutting off access to library services will disproportionately affect children, women, older people, people with disabilities, and BAME groups, all of whom use libraries more frequently than other groups.⁶
3. The community-run libraries would be cut off from services such as IT support, library catalogue, stock rotation, and lending between libraries. They would be reliant on a piecemeal network of volunteers. This would result in a postcode lottery of the availability, quality and consistency of library services.

What is being proposed for my local library?

Community or partner organisations are being sought across the county to run libraries with ECC support.

What does this mean?

- ECC will not be providing a library service in these locations, but will be outsourcing their statutory duty to local councils and other community groups.
- Staffing to be agreed with ECC, with community volunteers replacing professional library staff
- Opening hours would be dependent on the availability of volunteers. ECC have said that 'there will be a negotiated minimum number of hours if the community library is to receive council support'
- No guarantee of digital access to the library network (library computer network or online catalogue facilities). Any computers, equipment software and Internet access would need

⁵ Sian Cain, "Stealth closures': Essex groups back away from volunteer-run libraries', *The Guardian* (05/08/19) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/05/stealth-closures-essex-groups-back-away-from-volunteer-run-libraries> <accessed 09/08/19>

⁶ Reading Agency, 'Library Facts' (2019) <https://readingagency.org.uk/about/impact/001-library-facts> <accessed 08/03/19>

- to be provided by the community groups.
- Stock will be supplied by an initial one-off donation of books, which will be rotated quarterly from council stock 'in proportion to usage'. However it is not clear if this rotation will carry on after the first three years.
- It is expected that "community libraries would be run from premises owned or paid for by the community groups".
- A grant would be available for the first 3 years (£8,000 in year 1, £7,000 in year 2, and £3,000 in year 3) to assist with costs such as maintenance, furnishing, property rent, and purchasing computers, internet access, or additional stock.⁷ There is no money mentioned in the strategy document beyond three years. It appears every "community library" is then left to fend for itself. (See the next section for more information on the costs involved).

What does running a library service involve?

Essex County Council Libraries are currently managed by professional library staff. The challenges involved in running a library should not be underestimated.

*"it's really hard to run a community library. We don't have the money for acquisitions, so the books are out of date. We don't have trained staff, so there's little we can do in terms of helping with research and so on. We don't have enough staff, so we're only open 7-8 hours a week. We barely have the money to keep the building upright: it's an old portacabin, joyously full of asbestos (fortunately still safely intact and sealed). Councils are making a big mistake by handing such an important service over to the community, because no matter how dedicated or enthusiastic, the community lacks resources."*⁸

We are aware of 8 community libraries running in Essex at present. Their opening hours (as advertised on Council websites and social media pages) range from 16.5 hours per week (Jaywick) to just 1 hour per week (Lamarsh).

The existing volunteer-run libraries in Essex are already struggling to recruit and retain volunteers. Finchingfield community library opens for 6 hours per week, yet was forced to close unexpectedly on 3 occasions between 22nd September and 1st December 2018, due to lack of volunteers.⁹ Springfield Library (currently managed by Essex County Council but run by volunteers) was forced to close for 97 hours during the year 2017-18 due to a lack of availability of volunteers - six per cent of its allocated opening hours for the year. On other occasions, paid members of staff from other branches were transferred to Springfield to keep the library open,

⁷ Essex County Council, 'Essex Future Library Services Strategy 2019-2024' (2018) <https://libraries.essex.gov.uk/media/1015668/draft-essex-library-services-strategy.pdf> <accessed 08/03/19>

⁸ Comment by Lisvane Community Library volunteer (17/04/15) <https://calmgrove.wordpress.com/2015/04/17/libraries/> <accessed 20/01/19>

⁹ Finchingfield Library Facebook page (September – December 2018) <https://www.facebook.com/finchingfieldlibrary/> <accessed 20/01/19>

which would not be possible if the library was not part of the ECC library network.¹⁰

Each of our villages and towns is home to a large number of hard working and caring individuals, who volunteer their time for all manner of activities from picking up litter to running community cafes. However the pool of available volunteers is not infinite, and it is our experience that most people willing and able to volunteer are already working at or near their maximum capacity.

Adding to this, the duties carried out by professional library staff are wide-ranging, and at times challenging. Not all members of the public would be qualified or suited to carry out such a role.

From the Essex Libraries website we note that existing volunteer roles are divided into many types (for example 'Baby and Toddler Rhyme Time Volunteer'), in recognition of the varied duties involved in providing a library service. Many of these volunteer roles require a DBS check.¹¹ Recruiting and maintaining a network of volunteers is likely to be a job in itself, and for this reason, some authorities have struggled to make the volunteer-run model financially viable. According to Ian Anstice of Public Libraries News, "in Oxfordshire it is estimated that transferring to volunteers is not saving any money at all, once all other costs (including a volunteer co-ordinator) have been included."¹²

In recognition of the value provided by professional library staff and their intrinsic relationship with the success of a library service, we are lobbying Essex County Council to keep paid staff at the heart of the library service.

The Public Libraries News page '[What do Public Library Staff Do?](#)' gives a good overview of life as a public librarian. Job adverts for library roles reflect the variety of skills required. For example, the essential criteria required in a recent advert for Relief Library Assistant in Hampshire would be reasonably typical of a library assistant in a customer-facing role:

- Good general education (GCSEs or equivalent)
- Experience of working with the general public in paid or voluntary work
- Interpersonal skills
- Ability to communicate clearly in writing and orally
- Ability to work under pressure
- IT skills allowing use of Library Management Systems, SAP etc.
- Ability to cope with physical element of the job
- Ability to work alone and unsupervised
- Ability to process payments according to procedures
- Use of all equipment (e.g. library management system, telephone system, public IT)
- Moving and handling of objects up to 15 kg (daily requirement)
- Display screen equipment user

¹⁰ James Gregory, 'Community libraries are "not effective" in Essex as 100 hours are lost through volunteer shortages in Springfield' (12/01/19) <https://www.essexlive.news/news/essex-news/community-libraries-not-effective-essex-2407905> <accessed 15/03/19>

¹¹ Essex Libraries, 'Volunteering with Libraries' (2019) <https://libraries.essex.gov.uk/volunteering-with-libraries/> <accessed 20/01/19>

¹² Public Libraries News, 'Cons: reasons against volunteer library "community libraries"' <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/campaigning/volunteer-run-libraries/cons> <accessed 11/03/19>

- Lone working
- Human Blood or Human Bodily Fluid e.g. First Aid (if designated First Aider)
- This post is subject to an Enhanced DBS Check

As the list above implies, libraries do far more than simply lend books. Libraries also provide hands-on support, training and digital literacy for people who aren't confident using computers or the internet. According to the Office for National Statistics, 10% of people in England said they had not used a computer for at least three months when asked in 2018.¹³ There are many issues relating to IT provision in volunteer-run libraries - including the daunting set-up cost and data protection concerns.

Essex County Council expects community-run libraries to be run from other community buildings, rather than from the library's current location. Costs involved with volunteer-run libraries include premises, stock, IT equipment and software, volunteer recruitment, training and legal checks, and security. A Freedom of Information request revealed the current annual running costs, excluding staff costs, for every library in Essex. For example Prettygate Library had premises costs of £33,825 per annum, whereas its acquisition costs came to £14,260 per annum.¹⁴ Essex County Council is proposing to offer community libraries a grant of just £18,000 spread over three years - £8,000 in year one, £7,000 in year two, £3,000 in year three – after year three every "community library" is left to fend for itself.

The challenges involved mean that volunteer-run libraries have not always been successful. In Doncaster for example, there has been a staggering decrease in book loans since libraries were turned over to volunteers. One branch (Wheatley) had over 17,000 book loans per year when it was run by professional staff, which plummeted to just over 1,200 last year under volunteers.¹⁵

What other potential issues are there?

Double taxation: Residents have already paid for a library service in their Council Tax, and should not have to pay twice to maintain access to a service that ECC have a statutory duty to provide. "Having to support a library through parish council taxes or through volunteers/other contributions is a form of double taxation as the inhabitants are still paying council tax for the surviving public libraries in larger towns in the area."¹⁶

¹³ Office for National Statistics, 'Exploring the UK's digital divide (04/03/19)' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04> <accessed 11/03/19>

¹⁴ Freedom of Information Request – response from Essex County Council https://secureweb1.essex.gov.uk/Freedom_of_information/view_doc.aspx?DocID=21903

¹⁵ Stop the Privatisation of Public Libraries, 'FOI figures from Doncaster' (11/01/19) https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2162809440451014&id=404602829605026 <accessed 20/01/19>

¹⁶ Public Libraries News, 'Cons: reasons against volunteer library "community libraries"' <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/campaigning/volunteer-run-libraries/cons> <accessed 11/03/19>

Public Lending Right: The Public Lending Right (PLR) system makes payments to authors, illustrators and other contributors on the basis of loans of their books from public libraries. PLR is a major source of income for many in the profession. If a community-supported library forms part of a library authority's statutory provision, it would still fall within the PLR scheme. As the proposed Tier 3 and Tier 4 libraries in Essex have been deemed non-statutory (a decision which we are strongly opposed to), they would fall outside of the PLR scheme.

The Society for Authors have argued that if volunteer-run libraries are not covered under the PLR scheme then it is unlawful for such libraries to lend books, unless a license to lend was issued by the author. Authors would be entitled to sue such libraries for copyright infringement.¹⁷ On 25 July 2019 the Society for Authors called again for volunteer-- libraries to be included in the PLR system.¹⁸

If no expressions of interest are made, ECC will continue to run the library service

The following quotes are taken from the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee, which took place 18 July.¹⁹

Councillor Barker: "At the moment all 74 libraries across Essex are run by the council. If the community took over a facility and within that five years it failed it would come back to be run by the council."

Question from Councillor Henderson:

53:37 – "Out of the tier three/tier four present libraries, if no organisation comes forward to want to volunteer to take them over in those present buildings, will those libraries remain open and staffed as they are now? Because that's the promise that's been made to the public. Will those existing tier three/tier four libraries remain open if volunteers or anyone do not show an expression of interest?"

Councillor Finch replies:

"It's been very clearly said by [council officer] Liz Sutton that in terms of the library service that where there is no expression of interest we will continue to work with those communities so that there can be the continuation of a library service in that area, and I've already made the pledge

¹⁷ Society for Authors, Public Lending Right letter to Louise Mensch, MP (quoted in *Public Libraries News*) (12/07/12) <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2012/07/public-lending-right-manchester-stock-weeding-right.html> <accessed 20/01/18>

¹⁸ Mark Chandler, 'Call for community libraries to be included in PLR payments' *The Bookseller* (25th July 2019) <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/call-community-libraries-be-included-author-payment-system-1044951> <accessed 28/07/19>

¹⁹ Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee <https://cmis.essex.gov.uk/essexcmis5/CalendarofMeetings/tabid/73/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/410/Meeting/4340/Committee/129/SelectedTab/Documents/Default.aspx>

and the promise that no library will close. Therefore in answer to the question ‘if a library doesn’t have any volunteers will we continue to keep it open?’ the answer is yes, we will continue to keep it open, and we will continue to work with the community to see how we can move that forward so the library can meet the community’s needs.”

Question from Councillor Kendall:

61:55 – “A number of people that I’ve spoken to expressed interest in terms of being a volunteer because they thought their library was under threat of closure. So, let’s be very clear about this, worst case scenario, if no volunteers now come forward because the leader has said that all 74 libraries will remain open, is there a commitment that Essex County Council will run, with or without volunteers, those 74 libraries?”

Councillor Finch replies:

“I’m very clear that the library service will continue; that we will continue to operate the library service, with and/or without volunteers.”

What should Local Councils and Community Groups do now?

SOLE will be continuing to put pressure on Essex County Council to continue to invest in professionally-run library services across the whole of the county. We hope that local councils and other community groups will join us in this campaign.

We are aware that some local councils and community groups have submitted an Expression of Interest to run a community library, due to fear that the alternative was imminent closure of their library branch. We would like to re-iterate the Council Leader’s statement that “no library will close” in the next five years, and that Essex County Council will not force any library to become a “community library”.

Expressions of Interest are not binding, and we would now urge such groups to withdraw their offers and work with SOLE to ensure that Essex County Council upholds their responsibility to run a comprehensive and efficient library service across the whole county.

9th August 2019