

BECKENHAM LIBRARY

EXECUTIVE MEETING 27 11 2019

Peter Morgan, Executive Councillor for Renewal Recreation and Housing

1. Moving the library—

I am a bibliophile. I have probably 3000 books in my home. I support libraries and we have succeeded in renewing three libraries in recent years – Biggin Hill, Orpington and Penge. The usage has increased in all cases. We have plans to renew the libraries at Chislehurst, West Wickham and St Paul’s Cray. Beckenham is the third most popular library in the Borough. There is absolutely no intention of closing it

We will not consider moving the library unless the study we are commissioning tonight shows us that the new library will be at least as large and can accommodate at least the same number of books and will be flexible enough to allow the rooms to be used for functions and Community meetings. Our preliminary studies show that this will be the case or we would not have brought the appointment for approval this evening.

At our Biggin Hill library, at a new library I have inspected in Bexley and in another in Islington, the bookshelves are on wheels so that they can easily be pushed to the side in order for the room to be used for other purposes when the library is closed. The Public Halls are not fully utilised presently. I have a complete schedule of usage. It shows from Jan to August this year a total of 6 events. As to regular bookings, there is a Bridge Club which meets mainly in the evenings. During the daytime, we have Spiritual Healers once a week; and various meetings during the day, but the vast majority during the evenings or on Sundays. If we have flexible space then I am sure all these will be capable of being accommodated but that is in part what the study is about.

When we were considering moving the Penge library, the only premises we could find were those we have now close to the traffic lights in the town centre and our concern was that this location would be too close to the Beckenham library being only 0.8 miles away. The possible new location for the library in the town centre will be closer for those living in Central Beckenham, North Beckenham, East Beckenham and most of those south and south east of the town centre. It will of course be further away for those in Clock House but they would have the choice of Beckenham town centre, or Penge library.

Our experience of moving Orpington Library to the town centre is that the usage increased significantly and I would expect that the same would happen in Beckenham.

2. The refurbishment of the Public Halls:

The intention is to spend the money, released by the possible development of the library site, on a major refurbishment. That would transform this Arts and Crafts building into a venue of which we could all be proud and should increase the usage both for the library and community uses. If we decide not to proceed with the proposal then we would of course carry out necessary repairs but should be unable to carry out the refurbishment.

3. Housing:

LBB has a statutory obligation to house the homeless and we do so. We currently have about 1,600 families on our register. It is at least possible this number could rise. We set up the More Homes

project a while back and shortly that will have acquired the full number of 400 homes in which our homeless families will be housed. Many of these are not in our Borough. All the remaining 1,200 families have to be put up in nightly paid accommodation which we used to call bed and breakfast. It is our humanitarian duty to try our best to find proper permanent accommodation for these families and that is why the Council has decided to build at least 1,000 homes in the Borough during the next three years. We are starting with our own underutilised land and hence we have been looking at all land that we own in the Borough including the libraries. Hence the idea that the Beckenham site might be able to provide some of the new homes we need – but only of course if the library can be satisfactorily re-housed. Thus I confirm that 50% of any new [properties on the Beckenham library site will be affordable. I should clarify the word affordable because that covers various types. In this case we are talking about social rented housing where the rents should be within the Housing Allowance amounts and are the lowest rent type of affordable housing. The other 50% of any development would be private housing which would enable us to have the money to carry out the refurbishment. To be clear we have had a valuation of the site and are encouraged by that to believe that financially the proposal would be viable. The only true test of value is of course to offer the site to builders but they would have to allow LBB to have nominations to all the affordable housing.

Let me be clear, whilst we have an obligation to provide sites for 641 homes a year and possibly more once the new London Plan is approved, that is not the main driver. The main driver is to house the homeless.

We have projects under consideration at Chislehurst, Orpington, Burnt Ash Lane, West Wickham and Anerley.

4. Design:

The proposal tonight is solely to do with the Public Halls and if the appointed consultants do tell us that the proposal is viable and that a new library would be at least as large as the existing, then we would look at their proposals for the refurbishment with a critical eye and encourage public comments on the plans and drawings through a full consultation.

The drawing for a possible development on the library site has attracted much criticism, but this is only a space study to see what might be possible on the site consistent with not losing public open space. The actual design, if this happens at all, would be subject of architectural competition and again full public consultation. Clearly our planning officers and planning committees would be fully involved in this part of the process and personally I would be very interested in having a building here which complements the surrounding buildings and is attractive in its own right. I do not anticipate that the final result would look anything like the picture you have seen which, I repeat is simply a space study.

5. Allocation of land:

Certain critics have claimed that this land is not allocated for development. I will now read the advice from our planning department:

The site was not identified as a Specific Site Allocation in the Local Plan and remains as such. However, the policy requirement is for a minimum average dwellings per annum, and in Policy 1 of the Local Plan it states that the Council will “make provision for a minimum average of 641 homes per annum over the ten year plan period and where possible over the fifteen year plan period which will be achieved by” and the list which follows includes “j – The development of housing in Broad Locations (additional large sites within Bromley Town Centre, Orpington Town Centre and other

areas where there is existing large scale retail and **sites due to public sector restructuring** and other land disposal)" Therefore the site would make a legitimate contribution to housing supply within the specific intentions of the development plan policy.

6. Covenants:

It has been suggested that the site of the library was gifted to the Council with restrictions as to its use. We have made some legal enquiries with the following result:

The Library site, together with other land, was acquired by the Council from John Cator on the 15th February 1911 following the exercise by the Council of an option to purchase the said land contained in two leases previously granted to the Council by Albemarle Cator and others. The only covenant imposed on the Council in the conveyance was in respect of the maintenance of a wall on one of the boundaries and fences along the southern and northern boundaries. The Council had in 1899 previously acquired land to the west of the site which was subject to various covenants and subsequently in 1923 acquired the land to the north of the previously acquired land which was similarly subject to covenants. These covenants were varied by a deed dated 31st May 1932 and then released by a deed dated 31st May 1932 and then released by a deed dated 16th July 1984.

7. Consultation:

Several people have complained that there has been no public consultation about these proposals. At this stage the report merely deals with initial approval to proceed to procurement for concept designs. This will allow the Council to determine the viability of the scheme. If this work does show the scheme to be viable public consultation will commence prior to any subsequent report asking for approval to take the scheme forward

8. The Lambert Smith report:

The Lambert Smith Report is solely concerned with delivery methods for the Council and is not concerned with specific sites.

9. The Clock House shops:

Whilst some of the people using the library might occasionally visit the shops in Clock House, the 40 families who would occupy the new flats would also be able to do so and would be there 365 days a year. We are thus talking of about 120 new customers for 365 days a year. Potentially this would be greater benefit to these shops than the current situation.

10. Temporary location?

So far as I am concerned the old library will not be vacated until the new space is available

11. Conclusion:

I commend this proposal to the Executive for the following reasons:

We are seeking to make the best possible use of Council Assets

We want to refurbish and upgrade the potentially beautiful Public Halls Building

We want to increase the usage of the library and locate it close to a greater number of residents.

We could provide housing for our homeless families.

This evening's paper is solely about the appointment of consultants to prepare a viability assessment and drawings for the Public Halls. Once we have these, then if and only if, a new library can be properly accommodated in the Public Halls, we would proceed to the next stage and carry out a wide public consultation.