

Community Hubs
Debunking the Myth

Earlier this year Wolverhampton Council put forward a vision to create a series of Community Hubs across Wolverhampton.

The Council tells us that their proposals to co-locate youth, library and community services under one roof will protect and improve services.

This document contains some facts about the proposals.

Read it and see what you think.

Myth 1: Community Hubs will protect and improve services.

Fact: The Community Hubs proposals forecast a £600 000 cut to library staff and a £225 000 cut to the books and subscriptions budget.

Fact: The Council's Assistant Director of Leisure and Community Services reportedly defines a library as '3000 books, a machine and a member of staff'. Note: 'a member of staff' does not necessarily mean a librarian.

The current stock in the 14 branch libraries totals 188 911. This makes an average of 13 494 books per library. Many branch libraries have 3000 books out on loan. To reduce book stock and staff will diminish services not improve them.

Fact: The city's librarians consistently deliver an outstanding level of service. They are highly skilled and seen by library users as an essential part of the service. Our campaign group has received numerous examples from library users describing the caring, community-minded approach of branch librarians. Libraries are seen as safe places and the library staff are trusted. How will cutting £600 000 from the staff budget improve services?

Fact: The Council claim their proposals will provide 'advanced technology such as digital media'. The library service has been providing online dictionaries and encyclopaedias for 5 years. You can access this service via the following link:

http://www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/leisure_culture/libraries/reference/resources.htm

The proposed cut to stock and subscriptions budget will jeopardise not protect this service.

Fact: A recent survey by the Society of Chief Librarians showed that with regard to information and digital technology internet users trust library staff more than most other providers of online support and information and public library staff are second only to doctors in terms of the trust placed in them by seekers of information. Our city's libraries are already excellent providers of IT skills-how will removing librarians improve this ?

Fact: It will not be possible to deliver the same level of service in the face of the Council's proposed cuts.

Myth 2 The Pilot Schemes for Community Hubs have been a success

Three pilots for Community Hubs have been carried out.

1. Self issuing technology

The introduction of self-issuing machines at Tettenhall Library has been hailed as a success by Wolverhampton Council. In fact only 10% of issues/returns have been made via the machines. This leaves 90% of users rejecting the use of machines – hardly a success! Elderly users in particular have shunned the self-issue machines.

2. Blakenhall Community Living Centre

- Blakenhall was a new build scheme which cost £5.7 million. (Wednesfield Library cost £2.2 million)
The Council have only £3 million to invest in the entire Community Hub project for all 13 libraries involved plus the 22 community centres and 13 youth centres mentioned in the Community Hubs proposals.

- The Blakenhall pilot has not been running for long enough to show whether it is sustainable. Despite money being spent on significant marketing, the lending rates for Blakenhall for April and May this year are 5 times less than the branch average for the same period. There are spikes in the issue figures for Blakenhall in May which indicate that the self –issue equipment was being played with so it is likely that these figures have been artificially inflated..

- Blakenhall Library is a very small facility with little over 3000 books.

- The Council claim that Community Hubs will mean library users will be able to access the service up until 10pm at night. However, there is clear evidence from Blakenhall that library users prefer to use the service when the librarian is present. There is very little evidence that shows library users want a service beyond 7pm. The Council claim that their proposals for Community Hubs will save money but how is it either cost effective or environmentally prudent to heat and light a library facility up to 10pm at night for a small number of users?

3. Wednesfield Library

- Wednesfield Library was designed by an architect with no previous experience of designing libraries. As a result the children's section has been inappropriately situated. Other reports describe how the extensive glass windows compromise book stock with spine labels of classified books fading rapidly in the bright sun.
- Some community groups have moved to other venues because the Wednesfield building does not meet their requirements. Some information suggests that external income has dropped significantly so far this year from £9000 to £500.
- If you compare the lending rates to footfall at Wednesfield Library it is lower than the combined average for all of the other 13 branch libraries. This suggests that although large numbers of people use the building at Wednesfield they are not doing so in order to access the library service—the Council's figures clearly do not compare like for like.

Comment on the pilots

- More time needs to be given to study the Blakenhall Pilot in order to demonstrate sustainability and provide solid baseline data before claiming it as a success. The Blakenhall pilot is a very welcome addition to library services and the excellent work of the librarian there should be praised. The people of Blakenhall have gained a useful service. However, to use this pilot as a model for the future delivery of branch library services across Wolverhampton is unacceptable. If the Blakenhall pilot is used as a model for the future of library services in Wolverhampton then we will see a future where the service is massively reduced.
- Lessons can be learnt from the Wednesfield pilot—not least that there are environmental implications with regard to surplus Council building such as the old library lying empty.
Self-issuing technology is a welcome addition to the library service as it can free up time for librarians and cut queues at busy times. However, it should NEVER be used to replace skilled librarians.

Myth 3 Community Hubs will mean services are embedded in the heart of the community

Fact: Wolverhampton's libraries and community centres are already embedded in the heart of their communities. One of the greatest concerns so far expressed by residents and also commented on in the budget consultation last year was accessibility of services.

Example: East Park Library is already embedded in the heart of a community next to Wolverhampton's largest Primary School. Residents collected 1000 names on a petition to keep their library in the heart of their community. Under the Council's proposals East Park Library will close and the schoolchildren who currently use the library will not be able to do so on a regular basis.

Finchfield, Whitmore Reans, Penn and Spring Vale Libraries plus Daisy Bank, Lunt, Bradmore and Portobello Community Centres are just **some** of the other services where petitioners and campaigners have raised concerns about services being removed from the heart of communities. The truth is that services face closure and re-location away from the communities they serve.

Fact: Some of the proposed changes will mean that people have to make a four bus journey to access their local library. A family daysaver ticket costs £8—how is this making services more accessible?

Fact: The Community Hubs proposals will remove services from the heart of some communities in order to deliver a service to others. Some communities face losing their only community facility which will instead be situated in a position where it is unknown whether it will be as successful.

Question: So why spend £3 million pounds to disrupt community services and achieve nothing?

Myth 4: The Council is listening to residents' concerns

Fact: The Council has already had opportunities at two scrutiny meetings to respond to the enormous outpouring of public concern.

Fact: The Council failed to respond to concerns and were determined to continue with their plans to create Community Hubs.

Myth 5 'In the budget consultation last year residents supported the proposals for Community Hubs'

Fact: The concept of Community Hubs was raised in the budget consultation. However, the report on the budget consultation is 66 pages long and not a single mention is made of 'libraries'. Neither the library service or library user groups were consulted with.

Fact: During the same consultation a proposal was put forward to cut £500 000 from Youth Services. The Youth Service took part in the consultation and objected to this cut. In response the Council altered the £500 000 cut to £75 000 so that services were not affected.

Comment: It would appear that the library service was slipped under the radar of the budget consultation and was subsequently targeted as a soft option. The Council have listened to concerns over their proposed savings for Youth Services and responded by protecting the service from front line cuts. The Council should now take note of the massive outpouring of support in the form of 11,000 plus signatures which have been collected on independent citywide petitions in support of the branch library service and community centres.

And finally Myth 6 the biggest one of all 'We are not closing libraries'

Try telling this to communities when their library has closed and a smaller dumbed down version has opened up at a location they cannot access. A good example of the Council 'not closing libraries' is Tettenhall Wood Library—once a loved a popular facility serving its local community. Where is it now? It hasn't 'closed'; instead, it has been turned into 5 bookcases up a corner of a room in a community centre. Under the Community Hubs proposals libraries WILL close and their replacements will not deliver the same service either regards floor space, book stock or librarians.

Wolverhampton Citywide Libraries and Community Centres Action Group

The response so far from the residents of Wolverhampton to the Council's proposals is unprecedented within our city's history. People from all walks of life and all backgrounds have stepped forward and are working together. We are not professional campaigners, we are simply concerned residents who share a common desire to protect and save our services. We believe that the Council's current proposals are ill conceived and will devastate our services in a way that they will never recover from. For this reason we have set up a citywide petition 'Say NO to Hubs'.

You can sign the petition online on our website:

www.savewolverhamptonlibraries.wordpress.com

If you would like to sign a paper copy or would like to collect signatures for us on this petition please get in touch.

You can e-mail savewolveslibraries@gmail.com or phone 07415 630083

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