

Submission from the Friends of Sonning Common Library

to

Oxfordshire County Council

The proposed closure of Sonning Common Library

Monday 7 February 2011

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Enclosure

Letter regarding Oxfordshire County Council's statutory duty towards library provision under the terms of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.

Copies to:

Cabinet members

Joanna Simons, Chief Executive

Keith Mitchell, Council leader

John Jackson, Director, Social & Community Services

Carol Viney, County Councillor

John Howell MP

1. Proposal on the future of Sonning Common Library

The Friends of Sonning Common Library believe that if serious savings are necessary in the library service, a fairer and less divisive approach would be to spread the cuts across all of the county's libraries, leaving them all open but on a more limited basis.

We believe that if OCC continues to provide a core library service at Sonning Common - to include a library manager, purchase of stock and access to the county's library infrastructure - the local community will volunteer to support and enhance that core service, in line with residents' needs and wishes.

We advocate a partnership approach with OCC to the running of Sonning Common Library. This is our interpretation of the Government's 'big society' idea and we believe it is a notion of 'big society' with real merit and a chance of success.

If OCC continues to provide a core library service for Sonning Common the community will endeavour to:

- use volunteers to support the work of the library manager and for projects and special events
- work with the charity Community Support Volunteers on a project to encourage more young people into libraries
- accredit volunteers through the Open College network
- enhance the facilities and services e.g. internet and computer services, photocopying, faxing
- set up a coffee shop facility within the library to encourage more visitors and as a further facility for the village
- develop the home library service for housebound people in the village
- provide a venue for reading groups/book clubs
- use the library as a meeting place for more village clubs/societies
- develop a CD/ jigsaw exchange
- run quizzes, craft workshops, author evenings, literary festivals
- run more internet taster sessions using computer mentors
- extend children's story-time using story host volunteers
- extend children's holiday activities
- hold coffee morning fund-raising activities
- promote the use of the library through leaflet, poster and media campaigns.

2. Sonning Common Library: general information

Opening hours

The library is open for 25 hours a week.

Monday 2pm-5pm

Wednesday 2pm-7pm

Thursday & Friday 9am-1pm & 2pm-5pm

Saturday 9.30am-12.30pm

NB Sonning Common Primary School has sole use of the library on Tuesdays from 9am-4.30pm when library lessons, support sessions for topic work and story visits are organised.

Staffing

Currently four part-time staff are on the payroll, including the library manager who works an average 25-hour week.

Two assistants work an average 11.75 hour week.

A Saturday assistant works three hours a week and provides leave/meetings/sickness cover.

Three casual staff provide cover as and when required. One is also the volunteer library visitor to housebound residents.

Usage

A total of 500-600 local residents visit the library each week.

October - December 2010

Total number of all loans (books, DVDs, CDs, audio books): 12,678

Up by nearly 18 per cent.

July - September 2010

Total number of all loans (books, DVDs, CDs, audio books): 15,272

Up by nearly 24 per cent.

Population

The local BT exchanges serves a population of approximately 6,000 residents.

The parish of Sonning Common contains approximately 1,800 homes.

Sonning Common Library also serves populations in the neighbouring villages of Peppard, Kidmore End, Gallowstree Common, Checkendon and Stoke Row.

In 2010 the Sonning Common Community Plan survey was distributed to all homes in the village and returned by 78 per cent of households. It found that residents in 40 per cent of households are retired.

Special status

Sonning Common Library adjoins Sonning Common Primary School. The school currently makes a significant contribution towards the annual cost of heating, lighting and cleaning the library (the school receives a grant of £1,600 a year towards the £8,000 a year running costs for the library).

3. Campaign activities to date

The Friends of Sonning Common Library group was re-formed in December 2010 after the announcement by OCC to close 20 of the county's 43 libraries. The original Friends group fought successfully to save the library from a previous closure threat.

The Friends of Sonning Common Library are campaigning to:

Maintain county council funding to keep Sonning Common Library open and to retain our own, professional library manager.

The campaign to date:

- * A day of protest was held in the village on Monday 10 January
- * Approximately 200 people attended a public protest outside the library that morning, including children from three primary schools, one secondary school, two pre-schools, local authors, county/district/parish councillors and general village residents.
- * A public meeting in the village hall that evening, hosted by Sonning Common Parish Council, attracted around 250 concerned residents. The speakers were Ros Varnes (Chair, Friends of Sonning Common Library), Andy Lovell (Governor, Sonning Common Primary School), John Jackson (OCC).
- * A total of 570 letters and campaign postcards were delivered to John Jackson by the Friends group on 24 January. These were in addition to the letters already received by councillor Carol Viney and John Jackson and emails to the future libraries service (numbering approx. 100-200).
- * A Facebook campaign has been launched to save Sonning Common Library. More than 160 people have joined.
- * Sonning Common Library joined the National Libraries Day of protest on Saturday 5 February. An open morning was held to gather more supporters, signatures on a petition and ideas for developing the library.

The day of protest received extensive media coverage with items on BBC Radio 4, BBC South Today, Meridan TV, BBC Oxford and BBC Berkshire radio as well as the Henley Standard (pages one to three), the Reading Post and Reading Chronicle.

To come:

- * Continued letter-writing campaign
- * Co-operation in a joint campaign by other threatened libraries.

4. Arguments against the proposed closure

a. Access

Issues regarding using public transport to get to Henley Library

Public transport from Sonning Common to Henley, and return, is by Whites Coaches, financially supported by Oxfordshire County Council. The timetable is clearly based upon the use of the coaches for extended shopping trips to Henley and is not geared towards catering for shorter visits to the library.

Timetable

Days	<u>Out from S.C.</u>	<u>Arrive Henley</u>	<u>Start back from Henley</u>	<u>Arrive S.C.</u>	<u>Total time</u>
M – F	08.03	08.30	12.35	12.53	4hrs 50mins
M – F	10.21	10.40	12.35	12.53	2hrs 32mins
M – F	13.29	13.48	15.35	15.54	2hrs 25mins
Sat.	08.08	08.25	14.00	14.18	6hrs 10mins

1. Sonning Common's young people cannot get to Henley after school as the last coach from Sonning Common is at 13.29. They will be completely deprived of access to a public library.

2. The shortest overall time required for a return visit to Henley library to use its facilities or to borrow books is 2hrs 25mins. The especially limited Saturday service requires 6hrs 18mins overall.
3. Assuming that roughly half an hour is spent in the library, the user will have to 'kill time' in Henley for about 1hr 30mins.
4. Our recent Sonning Common Community Plan survey showed that c. **40 per cent of the residents of Sonning Common is over 65 and retired**. It is unfair and unreasonable to expect the elderly in particular to visit Henley library by public transport under the above conditions, and the time required would very seriously curtail the use of the library by other residents.
5. The cost of a return fare via Whites Coaches to Henley from Sonning Common is £3.70. This makes borrowing books/researching or using the facilities of the library (internet, photocopier etc.) very expensive for many potential users. (It is accepted that pensioners can use their bus passes).
6. Despite the county council's support for Whites Coaches, there is no guarantee that the current limited service will not be reduced at some point.

Issues regarding driving to Henley library

1. Many elderly residents of Sonning Common do not now drive.
2. Parking in Henley is usually problematic during the daytime, especially on Saturdays. This will tend to deter people from Sonning Common if they are coming simply for a visit to the library. For many at work, Saturday is the only time they have.
3. Elderly drivers tend to avoid driving in the dark and are particularly worried by the problem of finding parking spaces during the daytime.
4. As things are now, a person at home in a one-car family can easily access Sonning Common library during the day, and many do. Visits to Henley would have to be by Whites Coaches, a very different proposition as indicated above.
5. Henley library's closing times (8pm Mondays and Fridays, 5.30pm Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1pm Wednesdays and 4.30pm on Saturdays) make it very difficult, if not impossible, for Sonning Common residents to visit the library after work.

Conclusion

Henley cannot offer a practical, realistic alternative to a Sonning Common-based library service because of its access problems. It would be impossible for school children to visit the library in Henley after school and use books and the internet for homework and research projects as they currently do in Sonning Common. Very many elderly and working residents would find the access problems insurmountable.

Use of Reading libraries by Sonning Common residents

It has been suggested, informally, that Sonning Common residents could use Reading libraries (Central or Caversham), if Henley library could not be reasonably accessed. However, Sonning Common residents pay their council taxes to Oxfordshire and it is the responsibility of the council to

provide proper library provision to the area. Apart from this question of principle, the access problems to Reading for library visits are of considerable concern.

Issues regarding public transport to Reading libraries (Central or Caversham)

1. The likely overall time to travel by bus to Reading **Central** library from Sonning Common and return (M-Sat) varies from 1hr 37mins to 2hrs 7mins, assuming c. 30mins is spent in the library and reasonable walking time to and from the library is allowed for. This is not a fair expectation for our elderly population, and would very seriously curtail library use by many others, especially working people and children.
2. The likely overall time to travel by bus to **Caversham** library from Sonning Common and return varies from 1hr 7mins to 1hr 37mins, allowing for c. 30mins in the library and reasonable walking time to and from the library.
3. The standard return fare from Sonning Common to either Reading Central library or Caversham library is £3.80 for an adult and £2 for a child. It is accepted that the elderly may have bus passes, but the cost for other residents and children would be a significant deterrent. Sonning Common is not a wealthy area.
4. There is no guarantee that the current bus service to Reading will not be restricted in the future.

Issues regarding driving to Reading libraries

1. A return trip to Reading **Central** library by car from Sonning Common takes 1hr 33mins, assuming c. 30mins in the library and reasonable time for parking and walking to and from the library. The parking fee is £2.80. The time taken and the parking fee are again considerable barriers for those who wish to visit to borrow books.
2. A return visit to Caversham library would take 57mins, assuming c. 30mins was spent in the library and parking was possible. However, Chester Street car park (first hour free) is notorious for being full for most of the time during the day from Monday to Saturday. The large Waitrose car park is 'For Waitrose Customers Only' and is often full, especially on Saturdays. The parking situation presents real problems in Caversham and would very reasonably deter Sonning Common residents, especially the elderly, from driving to the library.

Conclusion

The use of Reading libraries, even if acceptable in principle, is not a realistic answer if Sonning Common library is closed.

General Notes

1. The use of private cars adds to the carbon 'footprint'.
2. Sonning Common has a wide range of shops and resources, including an enlarged Co-operative Store. Regular visits to Henley or Reading for normal shopping, which could also include library visits, are unnecessary for many people, particularly the elderly (40 per cent of our residents).

b. Sonning Common's 'larger village' status

There is a seeming mis-match between the proposed closure of the Sonning Common Library and the strategies outlined in the recently-published South Oxfordshire Proposed Submission Core Strategy (December 2010), which identifies issues and directions for growth and new developments in the South Oxfordshire area for the next 25 years.

One element of the core strategy is the classification of Sonning Common as one of the 12 'larger villages' in the South Oxfordshire area. These larger villages, together with the towns of Didcot, Henley, Thame and Wallingford, are seen as providing a strong network of settlements with a good range of services which then puts all parts of the district within about a five kilometre radius of any one of these 'centres'.

The strategy envisages the larger villages as acting as local 'service centres' to a network of the surrounding settlements.

The core strategy document notes the continuing decline of services in rural areas and makes reference, on a number of occasions, to the need to support and enhance the larger villages in their role as local service centres for their immediate rural area.

This view is emphasised in its policy statement CSR3: 'Proposals which result in the provision of facilities and services in the rural areas will be encouraged; those which result in the loss of services and facilities will be resisted'.

The proposed closure of Sonning Common Library is at odds with both this policy and the village's designation as one of the network of settlements providing a local centre for services and facilities, reducing the need to travel to meet day-to-day needs.

It is also worth noting that the SODC Settlement Analysis, which was used to identify the 12 larger villages seen as appropriate to act as local service centres, did so on the basis of scoring on 25 separate criteria which reflected key indicators of sustainability.

The final assessment table shows Sonning Common as the first of the larger villages (based on dwelling numbers plus a services and facilities score), following immediately after the four market towns in the South Oxfordshire area.

Planned housing developments targets for the larger villages will mean an increase in dwellings and therefore population in Sonning Common.

Summary

- The District Council is committed to maintaining existing services and facilities in rural areas.
- Sonning Common is designated as a provider of facilities and services to the local area.
- The concept of a local provider network recognises the importance of services and facilities being offered as close to people as possible.
- Sonning Common is currently highly rated for a wide range of services and facilities accessible from the immediate rural area.
- The planned growth in population will increase demand on all local services and facilities.
- The withdrawal of library funding will negate all the bullet points above.

c. Special Status

Sonning Common Library adjoins Sonning Common Primary School and is housed in a school building. The school - with 390 pupils on its register - contributes a significant proportion of the library's annual running costs (see amounts in general information section) and has undertaken to continue to help fund the library, despite a squeeze on its own budgets. The school is prepared to do this because of the value it places on the library's contribution to the education of its children.

The school considers the following issues to be key to the need to keep Sonning Common Library open:

1. Sonning Common Library is a recognised 'safe place to be' - somewhere where vulnerable children can go to read, research, use the internet and do homework.
2. The school is concerned that homework will suffer if the library closes. Significant numbers of children use the library after school to do homework and use the internet. Where will they go after school if Sonning Common Library closes? It is impossible for them to get the bus to Henley after school.
3. To close Sonning Common Library would be to discriminate against the disadvantaged. Around 20 school families have children who receive free school meals. They will not receive an equal access of opportunity if the library is taken away and they will be penalised for living in a rural community. From the end of March 2011 there will be no new funding for extended services - to help, primarily, the disadvantaged. So, this group will be disadvantaged further.
4. The school has a close working relationship with the library. Class visits are made to the library to support topic work. Lessons in how to use the library effectively are given by the library manager, helping children to develop useful research skills. The library manager also hosts several reading groups for Year 6 children and organises a popular book club.

Chiltern Edge Secondary School

Sonning Common also has a secondary school with 676 students on its roll. Students remain at the school until they are 16 when they take their GCSEs. During years 10 and 11 there is considerable need for them to refer to a library as part of the information-gathering process, as well as the internet and home resources (where they exist) to build on and extend the taught curriculum.

- 65 of Chiltern Edge students said they used Sonning Common Library regularly. (approximately 100+ students reside in the village)
- Duncan Andrews, aged 14, from Chiltern Edge School, attended the day of protest in Sonning Common on 10 January and spoke to the gathered crowd, reflecting the views of many other young people in the village:
'The library was a huge part of my childhood – my Mum used to take me there when I was little and take out books. I used to take out about five per week. If it was closed down, a huge chunk of my life would be missing and I think I can say that on behalf of a lot of my friends as well. I have got GCSEs coming up and I will need to take books out and use the computers and the library to research. If it was to close it would really hit us hard'.

Sonning Common Library is open for after-school use on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays (until 5pm) and on Wednesdays (until 7pm).

In addition to the two schools already mentioned, the library serves a further two primary schools, a special school and three pre-schools.

5. Conclusion

There is significant, clear and vociferous support for our campaign to retain central funding for Sonning Common Library and the services of our professional library manager.

The county council can be in no doubt that hundreds of residents are extremely concerned about the proposal to close Sonning Common Library and the far-reaching implications this would have for children, educational standards and the elderly in particular.

We do not consider Henley Library, supplemented by a mobile library service, to be a viable alternative. Public transport links to Henley are inadequate, as we have shown.

We do not believe it is viable to run our library using volunteers only. We consider a library manager to be essential to the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service, adequate to meet the needs of our large and developing village.

Sonning Common has around 1,800 households. If it is to fulfill its role as a service centre to surrounding villages, it requires more services, not fewer.

We appreciate that, as a country, we face severe financial difficulties and local authorities are under pressure to cut budgets. However, we fear that if the library is closed it will never re-open, however buoyant the economy becomes in future, and the county council would lose a valuable asset.

What we are saying is this. Allow us to keep our library, supported in significant part by the school. Maintain central funding for the service, the infrastructure and one library manager (thereby reducing staffing costs - there are currently four part-time members of staff) who will be on duty during opening hours.

We accept that there may well have to be retrenchment as part of the cuts across the whole of the library service and that this may involve a reduction in opening hours.

In return, we will endeavour to work as a community to provide volunteer help as necessary and to make our library even better.

We are not saying we will do it by ourselves, because we can't, but we will do it in partnership with the county council. That is 'big society' in action. And that is a 'big society' that might work.

Friends of Sonning Common Library

Ros Varnes

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