

Councillor Nick Wallis  
Portfolio Holder for Library Services  
Darlington Borough Council  
Town Hall  
DARLINGTON  
Co Durham

By E-Mail

3rd March 2016

Dear Nick,

### DARLINGTON: BOROUGH BUDGET PROJECTIONS – LIBRARY SERVICE CUTS

I am writing in connection with the current consultation on Darlington's Library services. I understand that the present context of local government spending in the North-East is very difficult. I still, however, cannot agree with the disproportionate cuts that you intend to apply to Library services in the town. These services are both vital and already cost effective; you are doubtless aware of two current *Google* reviews noting 'a magnificent old building and service second to none' and 'an absolute template for libraries everywhere'. A much more pro-active and intelligent approach is needed in the face of the present expenditure squeeze:

\* Secondary education standards in Darlington are generally poor. Library provision, in conjunction with schools and children's services, should be a key to tackling this drag on the town's future prospects by extending the habits of life-long learning. We hear much from the council about attracting investment through Darlington's good logistic position and attractive local character. Broad based education, the 'learning habit' and properly targeted resources to mould such services are vital to improving the access of locals to the better opportunities that come with inward investment; otherwise they will be confined to menial support roles with key jobs going to outsiders.

\* Basic Library services are not easy to 'partner' with private/outside provision. They should, therefore, have a higher claim on council resources than areas which can find such outside support such as in sports, some aspects of the arts and in a wide range of functional council services.

\* Library services represent a small niche in Borough spending yet they provide a prominent 'public interface' for the council. Areas of central administration and the support costs of councillors must be squeezed much harder still before such a key front line service is savaged.

\* The closure of Cockerton Library and the end of the Mobile Library service are very regrettable but justified if the consequent savings go to support the key Crown Street library.

\* I am mystified how the Council thinks that it will raise significant money from the sale of a purpose built library building, Listed Grade II, with some backlog of repairs. It seems more likely that you will end up with an empty liability building requiring ongoing upkeep making for an unattractive 'dead' space at a key town centre location. There is also the questionable moral act of selling a facility that was gifted to the people of the town.

\* Flexible and constructive thought should be given to possible 'additional' uses within the Crown Street building to spread overheads. For example accommodating the Registrar could be investigated as could a revived (and much needed) tourism/town information-promotion function in conjunction with the Darlington BID. Any such additional uses would necessarily put pressure on library space but perhaps this could be managed by looking at, for example, integrating the ICT and Reference facilities more closely. And would this space pressure be worse than the 30% 'public area' capacity cut provided for in the proposed move to the Dolphin Centre which also makes no provision for vital storage?

\* The Borough Council must ensure that Darlington benefits from 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 2025, an event of national and international importance. Local Studies is well placed to make a vital contribution in conjunction with the railway museum and interested voluntary groups. Local Studies should, therefore, be seen as an asset on which to base a search for outside funding and partnership working and not a target for debilitating cuts. If the continuity in expertise and collections in Darlington's local history is lost it is gone for good.

Thanks for reading this far. I am, of course, aware that I am engaging in special pleading, although this is more than justified by the value and quality of the current Library service. But I am also trying to make the case that there are other more proactive ways of tackling the problem than just surrendering – again - to 'inevitable cuts'. Reporting the opening of the Library on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1885 the *Northern Echo* asserted 'Today's proceedings mark the beginning of a distinct era in the history of Darlington' – if I was the Portfolio Holder I would not wish to be credited with drawing that 'distinct era' to an end.

Yours sincerely,

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