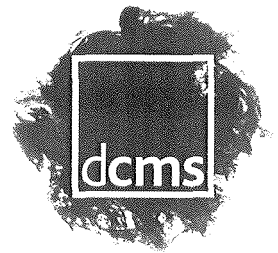


CMS 214722/DC

Councillor David Pugh
Leader
Isle of Wight Council
County Hall
Newport
Isle of Wight
PO 30 1UD



department for
culture, media
and sport

3 September 2012

Dear Councillor Pugh

Local inquiry into library provision on the Isle of Wight

The Secretary of State has now considered whether to intervene by directing an inquiry under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 Act into the changes in the library provision on the Isle of Wight. The Secretary of State is not currently minded to direct a local inquiry for the reasons set out below.

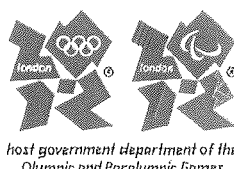
However, before taking a decision, the Secretary of State wishes to receive and consider any further representations from library users, the Council, or other interested persons. Any representations should be sent to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2-4 Cockspur Street, London SW1Y 5DH, or by email to enquiries@culture.gov.uk by 17 September. The Secretary of State will then consider the representations made.

The Secretary of State would particularly welcome representations bringing the evidence before him up to date, following the transfer to community provision of 5 libraries on the Isle of Wight.

A copy of this letter will be published on the DCMS website.

Timing

The question of a local inquiry has been under consideration by the Secretary of State for some time. It was appropriate to make any decision about intervention in the light of as full a picture as possible.



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Principles

The starting point is the 1964 Act. The Secretary of State has considered the duty of a local authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient service under section 7 of the Act. What constitutes a comprehensive and efficient service is a question involving a significant element of judgement. Those judgements are, in the first instance, for the local Council to make. It has intimate knowledge of local conditions and needs and has direct democratic accountability to the local population. This is a significant factor. The Secretary of State's view is that decisions about local issues should be taken by democratically elected local representatives accountable to local voters. Self-evidently, a wide range of approaches were open to the Council when deciding how to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. The Secretary of State also notes that the Council is entitled to take account of resources in deciding whether a proposal is efficient.

The Secretary of State's duty is of superintendence. He seeks to promote and secure the proper discharge of the statutory duties on local authorities and Councils. He has power to direct a local inquiry. His approach in deciding whether he is minded to intervene to direct an inquiry is to ask himself whether, having regard to the duties on him and the local Council, there is good reason in all the circumstances for him to exercise his discretion to direct an inquiry.

In taking that decision, the Secretary of State has given consideration to a number of factors. They include:

- Whether there is any serious doubt or uncertainty as to whether the Isle of Wight Council is (or may cease to be) complying with its legal obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.
- Whether the Council appears to be acting in a careless or unreasonable way.
- Whether the decision is or may be outside the proper bounds of the Council's discretion, such as a capricious decision to stop serving a particularly vulnerable group in the local community.
- Whether the Council has failed to explain, analyse or properly justify its proposals.
- Whether the local proposals are likely to lead to a breach of national library policy.
- Whether substantial further investigation is needed. A local inquiry would be more likely to be appropriate in a case where there are substantial uncertainties as to compliance with the statutory duty, little substantive engagement with the local authority and inadequate public consultation and discussion of proposals. The converse is also true.
- The advantages of local decision making by expert and democratically accountable local representatives.

- Whether there is any further good reason why a local inquiry would be appropriate or inappropriate.

The Secretary of State has also borne in mind that too ready an intervention would risk preventing prompt and efficient reforms of library services. Equally, failing to intervene in an appropriate case would risk the delivery of an efficient and comprehensive service.

'Minded to' decision

The library changes on the Isle of Wight involve the transfer of 5 libraries to be run by the local community, leaving 6 council run static libraries, supplemented by a Mobile Library Service visiting smaller towns and villages and a Home Library Service for housebound people. The community libraries are in Bembridge, Brightstone, Niton, East Cowes and Shanklin. Local groups (and in one case, the Town Council) have stepped in to run these libraries. They remain open (with reduced hours) and represent a valuable supplementary resource for residents of the Isle of Wight. The Secretary of State strongly supports the work of these local groups in taking over responsibility for the libraries. However, for the purposes of his assessment as to whether to order a local inquiry, the Secretary of State has based his view solely on the 6 remaining Council run libraries, and the council mobile and home library service. Although the community libraries are a valuable local resource, for present purposes they have not been taken into account when deciding whether to intervene by directing an inquiry because they do not form part of the Council's statutory public library service.

The 6 council run libraries are in Cowes, Freshwater, Newport, Ryde, Sandown and Ventnor. The opening hours of these libraries have been reduced, save in the case of Newport, whose opening hours have been increased to 50 hours per week. The reductions in hours at 1 June ranged from around 5 hours a week (Ryde) to 15,5 hours a week (Freshwater).

The libraries that were transferred to community provision were little used. The libraries that remain under Council control are those that are most heavily used by library users. Prior to the changes, 82% of library visits were to the 6 council libraries. Indeed, 49% of usage came from just two libraries – Newport and Ryde. The Council has considered the effect of the transfer. It assesses that between 48 and 55% of people who used the 5 libraries transferred to community provision already use more than one library. Local bus timetables have also been taken into account when setting reduced opening hours.

The local authority carried out a public consultation on proposed changes to the library service. The Council revised its proposals in response to that consultation. The Council continues to run 6 libraries. Further, proposed closure dates were substantially extended to allow more time for community groups to bid for, train and start running libraries. Furthermore, the outreach services including mobile and home library services are in place and will serve the local communities throughout the Isle of Wight.

The Secretary of State's current view is that the Isle of Wight council continues to offer a comprehensive and efficient library service. There remain a substantial number of Council run libraries across the Isle of Wight, supplemented by outreach services for those in smaller towns, villages and other rural locations. Careful thought has been given to ensure that library services continue to be available to residents on an efficient basis. The changes were made following a public consultation. There appears to be no good reason why an inquiry ought to be commenced.

Not every reduction in library provision will justify a local inquiry. In the present case, the Secretary of State's current view is that an inquiry is not appropriate. Further representations are invited by the date set out above before any final decision is taken on the material issues in this matter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Vaizey'.

Ed Vaizey MP
Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries