



Department
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David Renard
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CMS 300986/DC

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Dear David

Three Swindon residents and a resident from neighbouring Oxfordshire have recently raised with the Secretary of State their concerns regarding the future library service provision to be provided by Swindon Borough Council (SBC). Their concerns include the reduction in the number of statutory core libraries from 15 to 5, cessation of funding for the 10 remaining libraries and a reduction in the total number of staffed hours at the remaining libraries. They have asked that she review the proposed changes to Swindon's library service to ensure that the Authority is meeting its statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 ("the Act"). Copies of the letters are attached.

You are aware that it is the duty of the Secretary of State to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities and secure the proper discharge of the duties conferred on local authorities under the Act. Under the Act the Secretary of State may intervene if she is of the opinion that a local authority is failing to carry out its duty under the Act to deliver a "comprehensive and efficient" library service for library users, by making a remedial order following a local inquiry. The local inquiry can be commenced either on receipt of a complaint or of the Secretary of State's own motion.

When we met I indicated that the Department was of the view that the representations should be treated as a formal complaint. Following consideration of their advice I can now confirm that the Department is treating the representations as a formal complaint under section 10 (1) (a) of the Act that Swindon Borough Council is failing to carry out its duties relating to the public library service imposed on it by or under the Act.

In order to consider the complaint fully and to decide if a local inquiry is needed to resolve any serious doubt or uncertainty as to whether the Council is complying with its statutory duties under the Act, we firstly need to collate all the relevant information regarding the proposed changes to the library services. Although my officials have held a number of discussions with your officers regarding the Council's library proposals, they will now discuss with your officers the specific detail that is required to assist our consideration of the complaint.




I am aware from my discussions that Swindon Borough Council intends delivering savings from its total budget over the next four years, including a reduction in the library budget of £1.5 million by 2020. The approved changes to the library service were agreed by the Council Cabinet at its meeting on 7 December 2016 and included a reduction in the number of statutory static libraries (15 to 5), library staff and staffed hours. I am also aware that the Cabinet agreed to allocate transitional funding to support the development of non-statutory community led library services and that the Council is continuing to engage with the community and Parish Councils to explore this option.

In terms of consideration of the complaint you should be aware that the specific question to be addressed is whether the statutory library service provision, after implementation of SBC's proposals, of 5 core static libraries; professional library services, including Outreach, IT and Digital Services, a book reservation and delivery service and a home library service; and enabling services for community-led provision supported by transitional funding, is comprehensive and efficient.

I understand that the Council intend to introduce the changes to its library service provision from the beginning of April 2017. It is for elected members to decide whether or not to continue with the implementation of your plans, including any library closures, prior to the outcome of the Secretary of State's consideration of the complaint and determination as to whether or not to order a local inquiry.

A similar letter is being provided to the complainants.

Yours sincerely


ROB WILSON