

Call-In of Cabinet Decision – Mobile Library Service (Minute *359 of 12 July 2023)

In accordance with the Scrutiny Procedure Rules, the Chair of the Corporate, Infrastructure and Regulatory Services Committee (Councillor Dewhirst) has invoked the call-in procedure in relation to the decision of the Cabinet (Minute *359 of the 12 July 2023) in relation to the Mobile Library Service in Devon.

The grounds for this call-in are detailed below.

1. When Cllr Connett spoke, the issue of leasing was raised. Then during the Cabinet meeting, it was revealed by the Head of Communities that officers had looked at leasing mobile library vehicles as an option to continue the service. However, this was not mentioned in the report to Cabinet, so Cabinet members had no opportunity to consider leasing as an alternative option to sustain the service. It was only in response to Cllr Connett's comment that the Head of Communities revealed leasing had been considered. However, the report did not set out how officers looked at this, what the financial considerations were and why it was not considered a viable option.

2. The report is unclear on whether the £217,000 being saved by axing the mobile library service is a genuine revenue saving to the council or is the money being 'recycled' into Libraries Unlimited to help meet service costs? This was not made clear during the meeting. It was stated that that the saving was a 'saving to the council'. It was also said it would support Libraries Unlimited who, without it, would have to make other cuts. Therefore, the Cabinet has decided to axe the mobile library service without the knowledge of what other cuts the library contractor would make - and therefore the Cabinet did not compare and consider the range of cuts and their likely impact on communities. The only option was to axe the mobile libraries.

3. Two councillors from Torridge District Council presented a petition at the start of the Cabinet meeting against the cuts. The petition was presented to the Leader of the Council. However, the Cabinet did not consider the petition, refer to it, or take it into account in any way before deciding to cut the mobile library service.

4. The Report before the Cabinet was silent or obscure on how any costs of the mobile libraries closure would be dealt with - for example, redundancy, pension costs etc. Therefore, the Cabinet has failed to consider the full financial impact on other budgets of the council - including identifying how the proposed one-off grant of £25,000 in Option 2 would be funded, and where any redundancy costs would be met from.

5. *The Cabinet had not considered the adequacy of the proposed £25,000 for mitigation measures of withdrawing the mobile library vans. The report did not describe how the figure of £25,000 was arrived at, what the evidence is to show it would be sufficient, nor how long the proposed mitigations proposals would last. The Cabinet was not clear on the detail of the proposed mitigations, what the various schemes are and how they would work in detail so that they had assurance about residents still being able to access books and library services.*

6. *There appeared to be confusion about the figures used to support the recommendation to axe the mobile library service. Figures, it was said, described a fall in the number of users but it was not clear that analysis was on a like for like basis in that there used to be 8 vans, then four which included the use of a 'stand-in' replacement vehicle, resulting in vans not being able to operate if they were in for servicing or had broken down... all leading to fewer customers being recorded. Cllr Cheryl Cottle-Hunkin (Torridge, petition presenter) in her commentary suggested there had been an increase in customers from 2019 to 2022.*