

Library Networking Forum Notes 2nd March 2017, 2 - 4pm Bishop's Castle Library

1. Welcome and introductions

Mike Ashwell and Michael Lewis welcomed everyone to Bishop's Castle and the network meeting

2. Overview of Bishop's Castle library

Mike Ashwell, Enterprise House Manager provided a background to how Bishop's Castle library was transferred to Enterprise South West Shropshire.

Enterprise South West Shropshire (ESWS) was established 21 years ago and is a limited company, but its articles of association limit the directors ability to take funds from the company and also state that any profits are put back into the company and its work. So it is in effect run on the model now known as a social enterprise.

The company was established in partnership with South Shropshire District Council to distribute Rural Challenge Funding which was available to support a range of economic and social outcomes in and around Bishop's Castle through a grants scheme. These included development of village halls, rural business grants and support for economic development in Bishop's Castle. This included taking over a recently closed factory unit and turning it into a business enterprise centre featuring workshops, business units and an IT centre.

A few years later the small Shropshire Council library, previously located in a small building elsewhere in the town, moved into Enterprise House and provided an improved service in a bigger space. The library run successfully since then under Shropshire Council. 3 years ago negotiations between ESWS and Shropshire Council started into whether ESWS would take on the management of the library, as happened with a number of smaller libraries in Shropshire.

The library opened 4 days a week and had two staff, as well as a small group of volunteers under Shropshire Council management. Initial agreement was reached quite quickly to transfer the management to ESWS along with the Customer Service role at the building. Due to the companies long history of working with South Shropshire District Council and then Shropshire Council it was hoped that a short partnership agreement could be reached, but as the discussions progressed the legal agreement for the transfer become more complicated and detailed. This was a frustration shared by other community groups in Shropshire.

However, agreement was reached and the staff were TUPE transferred to ESWS, with a separate arrangement for the pension contributions made between SC and ESWS which reduced ESWS long term liabilities for pensions which had been a concern during the negotiations. The transfer took place in April 2016 and since then the library has run well. Its staff have given particular focus on attracting young people to use the library through events and book clubs. Support for supply of new books and back office administration has continued through Shropshire Council, and a programme of events linking into national events has also been planned.

The funding agreement runs from 3 years from April 2016 and some work has taken place looking at the future of the library beyond this date. Mike stressed that a library of the size of Bishop's Castle would always need some paid staff to provide a standard service and that was something Shropshire Council needed to consider. However, there could be

greater roles for volunteers and Friends Groups to help contribute to some aspects of the library operation and fundraising in the future. Mike used the example of the SpArC theatre in Bishop's Castle (also run by ESWS) which had a very active group of 20+ volunteers supporting the operation of the theatre.

Enterprise House, where the library is located, is owned by Shropshire Council and a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) is being prepared to transfer the building on a 125 year lease. As well as the library there are offices, workshops, meeting rooms and an equipment hire service within the building which help contribute to the companies income.

3. Update from Community Library representatives

Pontesbury – This library is still run by Shropshire Council but the Friends Group and Parish Council make a contribution to Shropshire Council to allow it to continue to be operated. The level of these contributions will increase in the next two years so work on fundraising is continuing. The Friends Group has around 350 members and events such as a Santa Run have been help to raise funds. Other groups in the area have also helped such as a raffle for the library at the village pantomimine.

The library building is small, so unlike Bishop's Castle there are not many options for using the building to earn extra income. There were plans for a new community building as part of a new housing development in Pontesbury which the library could have been located in, but these plans are not yet fully developed and there are some concerns a new community building might make the others less viable.

Bayston Hill

This group are still at the early stages of planning the future operation of their library. A new site for a community hub building is being looked at in Bayston Hill which could provide the opportunity to co-locate the library with other services such as the Parish Council

However this is a long term project and in the short term the Parish Council are looking at a similar model to Pontesbury of them contributing to Shropshire Councils budget to maintain the service. A new Friends Group is also being established to help with support and fund raising for the library

Highley

This library has been run within the Severn Centre for some time and continues to work well alongside a range of other services and the leisure centre. The library could also be used to help deliver the "resilient communities" work in Shropshire which is related to health care provision and allowing people to access support and services in their own community.

Albrighton

Like Bishop's Castle library Albrighton library transferred to a community run model in April 2016 with the Parish Council taking on the library and moving their office to the same building. Registration of the building is now almost complete. The day to day operation of the library transferred smoothly and created continuity of service for customers. Work has started on looking to the future with initial talks taking place around whether a precept increase might be used to help fund the library in the future. This is seen as the best way forward as the building doesn't offer many opportunities to earn other sources of income.

4. The Role of Friends Groups in helping promote and run a community library.

A workshop session took place to discuss the role of Friends Groups in Shropshire's libraries, and to discuss whether the groups needed to play a slightly different role in the future as libraries moved to a community ownership model. Key points from the discussions that took place were

- Friends Groups in each library are different and run in different ways
- Most Friends Groups had emerged from some kind of threat to the library which had rallied people to join the group and lobby for protecting the library. Over time this enthusiasm reduced and recruiting people to Friends Groups become more difficult
- More established Friends Groups tended to support the libraries through traditional fundraising activities such as social events, plant and book sales and book readings
- Funds raised were spent on new equipment, books and activities and weren't really used to support the revenue costs of libraries
- New Friends groups, such as those Pontesbury ran different activities such as raffles, Santa Runs and are exploring running "100 clubs" knowing that they need to raise larger sums for the revenue costs of their libraries
- Friends Groups tended to involve older people, and it was felt getting younger people involved was important to keep the groups going and to have fresh ideas.
- "Reward" schemes for volunteers could be looked at to give people things like free sports sessions or discounts at local shops could be looked at to encourage people to join a Friends Group and volunteer
- As community libraries develop Friends Groups might also need to become more skilled at making grant applications and thought was needed on how best to support groups recruit volunteers
- Friends Groups might also need to take on a lobbying role in relation to local and national policies
- Challenges for the future include the number of people living in communities but working elsewhere so they are less able to offer their time volunteering in the local community

The group agreed this was an important issue and something they would return to at future meetings

5. General update from Shropshire Council Library Service on county wide issues

Michael Lewis explained that work had started on looking at the future of larger libraries in Shropshire, including Shrewsbury. These services faced the same issues as smaller libraries had experienced such as staffing, building ownership and co-locating with other services, but on a larger scale. So far some progress had been made about groups taking on these services but no major decisions had yet been made

The Library strategy for Shropshire is being developed and should be ready around June. This will set the strategic framework for libraries in the future, which will include community led libraries. The group asked if they could comment on the strategy before it goes out for consultation, and it was agreed this would be a good approach

The library service also have a development team which are looking to develop programmes around key areas such as literacy, reading and digital inclusion

The group then went on to discuss what funding might be available from 2019/20 when the majority of existing funding arrangements would end. Michael said that in part the Library strategy would cover this, with Shropshire Council funding being linked to what

the strategy contained. Other forms of funding, such as grants from the Arts Council seemed less straightforward to apply for. These grants are more project focused, rather than for revenue support.

There might be scope for the network of community libraries to work together on larger funding bids in the future, and there was general agreement that working together in the future could be beneficial. The group would also return to the issue of funding and wider strategy at future meetings.

6. Future meeting dates

Friends of Pontesbury Library volunteered to host the next meeting and the date of Wednesday June 7th at 2pm was set for the meeting.

Members of the group can put forward agenda items for discussion ahead of the meeting. Thought also needed to be given on how other library groups can be involved in the meetings.