

Dear Sir

Somerset County Council is to be applauded for listening to its electorate, and the revised proposals for cuts to the Somerset Library service announced on Tuesday 25th January are a welcome step in the right direction: but they do not fully meet the concerns of Somerset residents.

While the proposals contain a reprieve for a number of threatened libraries including Glastonbury, Cheddar and Shepton Mallet they continue to recommend withdrawal of funding from 11 libraries, mostly in rural areas. The idea that these libraries could be run, without support, by their communities, is an obvious non-starter.

The community run library at Little Chalfont, which was being held up on BBC News broadcasts last week (much to the irritation of those who run it) as a beacon for community control, has to pay £20,000 per year for IT provision, inter-library loans, rent on its building (and the books!) and supplies: a figure that includes a management fee from Bucks County Council. Could Porlock afford that? Nor has the council announced any change of heart over its proposal to cut the number of mobile library vehicles from 6 to 2. Once more, it is the most rural parts of our rural county that are to bear the brunt of the cuts, even under the new proposals.

There are still models of funding which would allow Somerset County Council to meet its need to make savings without closing libraries. There are avenues of cost savings – through self-issue technology, sponsorship, sharing of premises with commercial concerns, extending charges for research carried out by library staff – that have not been sufficiently explored. Even if a library is only able to open for a few hours a week, the building, books and equipment remain, and access can be extended in a more favourable financial climate. But make no mistake: the decision to close a library completely is irreversible: any library that closes its doors now, does so forever.

The County Council has already demonstrated its willingness to consider options other than closure: now it should have the courage and wisdom to go further, and announce that it will take more time to think, consult and plan; that it will take no irreversible decision to close a library until every other avenue has been explored; that it will do everything possible to ensure that all Somerset libraries stay open for the benefit of residents who have clearly demonstrated their need, and affection, for this vital service.

Yours sincerely

Steve Barlow
Kathryn White
Sue Purkiss
Somerset children's authors
For and on behalf of the Campaign for the Book

