

Library funding cuts will not mean less service

✘ The full council meeting this morning opened with prayers for many in the city, but most especially the Lord Provost, the Rt Hon George Grubb, who is in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary today undergoing an operation. However this reflective mood did not last for long.

The meeting listened to a deputation from Unison who addressed the meeting in relation to the Library strategy. The new strategy has been the subject of a consultation which received an unprecedented 10,000 comments from members of the public and others. Unison claimed that the public do not know the level of cuts which are really being proposed by the council. A variety of figures were bandied about during the ongoing discussions by elected members.

The report produced to the meeting called for approval of “the revised budgetary position agreed by Council on 9 February 2012 which reduced the total Administration cuts to libraries from the £602,000 agreed in their budget of February 2011 to £302,000.” This seems good on the face of it, except that Unison then mentioned an actual cut of over £1/2 million, others in the room mentioned cuts of £250,000, although most were agreed on the number of staff lost from the library service. According to Labour Councillor Munro more than 50 jobs have been lost during the time the SNP/LibDems have been in charge of the council.

Councillor Munro said:-“Everyone in this room values this service. Staff in libraries are willing to take on more duties not less and staff numbers have been reduced by 54 since 2007. Some of this gives you the context for today’s Unison deputation which is the first I can remember from anyone working in the Library service. It takes a lot to stir up

librarians to put themselves forward as a deputation.” He claimed that there was a lack of information on all these cuts of £250,000. He asserted that the whole premise of the argument has been changed by putting £300,000 back in but still cutting £250,000. He continued heatedly:-“We want to take an informed decision, not one based on officer advice! This cut of £250k will fall on staff, stock or service. A focus group will not mitigate this reduced funding and standards will inevitably fall. I have serious concerns, especially about the working conditions of staff and the job they are being asked to do with a dramatic cut in funding. You cannot expand the service and contract the funding. Something has to give. The administration and their officers will not inform Councillors exactly what this cut means for the service, but the City deserves to know.”

Fellow Labour Councillor Ewan Aitken commented that the cuts might mean that there are only two members of staff on duty in a library at one time.

Councillor Deidre Brock who proposed the administration motion claimed that online library transactions, such as reservations or borrowings, which have more than doubled to over a million a year do much to save the council money. “Even emails about library fines save money,” said Brock.

LibDem Councillor, Conor Snowden, said:- “Labour think that throwing more money at this will sort the problem out. What we are providing is more service for less money. I urge you to vote for this motion.”

Councillor Johnstone in opposing the motion said:- “I have been contacted by a member of the library service. I am pleased to support the Labour amendment this morning. The report before us provides insufficient information on which we can take a decision. The service is a lifeline to many residents.”

Council Leader, Jenny Dawe mentioned the recently opened Drumbrae Community Hub and Councillor Paul Edie (LibDem) called on Labour to stop scaremongering about cuts to the library service, and Councillor Brock retorted to Councillor Blacklock that MacDonald Road library hours will actually increase as a result of the council proposals.

Following a comment by SNP councillor Stuart Roy McIvor during this debate the Labour Group have called for an apology from him. After hearing a deputation from library workers arguing against a cut of £250k to the service by the SNP/LibDem administration, SNP Councillor Stuart McIvor stated that he "did not know who the trade unions represent."

Labour leader Andrew Burns said:

"I find it shocking that after trade unionists, representing their workforce, come to this Council to outline their concerns, their role is questioned by an SNP Councillor.

Councillor McIvor's comments are insulting to library workers in Edinburgh and indeed to all trade unionists. He should publicly retract his statement and issue an apology."

The motion was then passed by the meeting, and the amendment proposed by Labour along with the Green group. The text of the motion which was referred from the Culture and Leisure Committee of 22 February read as follows:-

1. To welcome the recent Council decision to award a further £300,000 to Libraries in 2012/13 to be used in relation to library opening hours in response to consultation results and to align library opening hours with community need.
2. To welcome the proposal to retain Sunday opening in the 6 libraries currently offering this and the promotion of

libraries in Ratho, Granton and South Queensferry to Group B.

3. To agree recommendations 9.1(a) and 9.1(b) in the report by the Director of Services for Communities subject to the following modification: To note the consultation responses to the proposed changes at Piershill Library and to instruct the Director of Services for Communities to redefine Piershill Library by promoting it to Group A. moved by Councillor Brock, seconded by Councillor Thomas

The text of the strategy which closed at the end of January can be accessed from [the council website here](#).

It was apparent to anyone who had read the agenda before the meeting that the current body of councillors are already jockeying for position ahead of the May local government elections, from the sheer number of questions being asked either on the floor of the city chambers or in advance of the meeting. In addition, as matters progressed it became obvious that party divisions would make for an increased degree of contention among the political groups which has not always been just quite so obvious up till now.

The final council meeting of this administration will be on 26 April 2012.