



**Wandsworth Liberal Democrats**  
Open, Tolerant and United

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Councillor Jonathan Cook  
Cabinet Member for Community Services & Deputy Leader of the Council  
Wandsworth Council  
Members' Room  
Wandsworth High Street  
London SW18 2PU

By email to: [jcook@wandsworth.gov.uk](mailto:jcook@wandsworth.gov.uk)

7 March 2017

Dear Councillor Cook,

**Northcote Library and Chatham Hall**

We (Wandsworth Liberal Democrats) write on behalf of concerned local residents, in relation to the Council's proposed demolition and redevelopment of Northcote Library and Chatham Hall, and to raise some concerns as to the manner in which the Council has recently proceeded.

On the evening of Tuesday 28 February there was a meeting at Honeywell School, to which Councillors, Jane Ellison MP and others were invited. We understand that you, Councillor Cook, and Mrs Ellison were unavailable. But other councillors attended, including Conservative councillors Peter Dawson and Jane Dodd and Labour Councillor Fleur Anderson.

Wandsworth Liberal Democrats were invited and were among those who did attend. As you know, the Liberal Democrats are not represented on Wandsworth Council.

Several concerns were raised by residents at that meeting. Those views were evidently based upon concern for the happiness of local people and many of those who spoke had strong and longstanding connections with the area. The speakers were obviously sincere and, while the Council might choose to disagree, their concerns were clear and well-founded.

The residents' concerns included:

- The short period of the consultation (including concerns that it had been commenced during half term, when many families affected are away from home)
- The impact of the proposed demolition and redevelopment programme upon the local community (including, but not limited to, the use of the library and Chatham Hall by local children and by a nursery and dance school)
- The change of the library building from an entirely public space (in its existing building) into a building shared with commercial and private residential space
- The characterisation of the existing buildings (Chatham Hall and Northcote library) as dilapidated structures, beyond their natural life and unfit for purpose, which many residents considered to be both inaccurate and unfair.

On Friday 3 March, apparently in the wake of that meeting, you wrote a letter to residents. That letter was delivered to residents' homes (as far as we can tell, as a general mailing across at least two wards) on Saturday 4 March. Given the scale of that posting, most of the recipients of that letter would not have been at the meeting on the previous evening, so the impression given by the letter was important.

You started that letter by describing concerns about the council's proposed redevelopment in these negative terms:

"Unfortunately there is some misinformation circulating locally that misrepresents what is being proposed"

You do not describe the "misinformation" that, in your word "misrepresents" the proposal, but that appears to be a reference to the concerns raised by residents.

You also described the existing library building in these terms:

"The existing building was built in the 1960's and is nearing the end of its natural life. It has many design flaws, offers no ground floor space for computers, is poorly ventilated, has inadequate natural lighting, obsolete toilet and baby changing facilities, no "parking" space for buggies and restricted shelf space"

and

"We have also considered whether or not the existing library could simply be refurbished to bring it up to modern standards, but this would be prohibitively expensive and would still leave a small, cramped building with sub-standard amenities. There is no budget available to pay for such a project"

You went on to describe the proposed demolition and redevelopment in contrasting, unequivocally positive terms:

“The aim is to build a bigger and better library with an improved children’s section, alongside and new and improved community centre”

and

“In summary, at a time when other councils are axing their library network, we want to improve and expand our facilities in a building that’s fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”

We would raise the following points at this stage:

- Your letter of 3 March does not justify the strong allegation that you make against critics of the Council’s redevelopment proposal, namely that they have circulated “misinformation ... that misrepresents” the proposal. The timing of that comment in a Council letter, written shortly after a public meeting, is unfortunate. We are surprised by your choice of words. You give the impression that the only reliable opinion is that of the Council and you state in terms that its critics seek to mislead. On the contrary, the residents concerned are presenting their views on a matter of clear local importance, sincerely, and are taking their own time and much care to do so.
- Your letter of 3 March came not only soon after a public meeting but also towards the Council’s deadline to end the consultation period on the proposal (11 March). We are concerned by the delivery of a letter by the Council, put in such one-sided terms, so close to the end of the consultation period. The letter presents the proposal, in effect, as the only sensible option. Its desired effect appears to be to discourage examination of the proposal.
- As commented upon at the meeting, there is unhappiness in the community at the Council’s characterisation of the existing buildings in overwhelmingly disparaging terms. Both buildings are familiar to those of us who live in the area. We and our children have used and enjoyed them and continue to do so. The Council’s account of the state of the buildings appears to have surprised those previously unfamiliar with the buildings, such as Councillor Anderson, who remarked as such at the 28 February meeting. The claims made by the Council as to the state of the buildings are not self-proving. For example, the Library enjoys a good deal of natural light, thanks to its design. Its modern design is distinctive and, in any event, the Council proposes its transfer into a modern and arguably more generic “block” like building (so the implied criticism of its 1960’s design seems unconvincing). Chatham Hall is home to an Ofsted-certified “Outstanding” children’s nursery – not a likely outcome if the building had been dilapidated.

There are also concerns as to:

- The durability of the Council’s prediction that this project will be cost-free to the Council

- Whether all of the allegedly increased space in the new building will be usable for the purposes that the Council describe, and be usable by the public at all times (including the current use of the library by local pupils as a space to do homework)
- The loss of outdoor space to Chatham Hall (and particularly the impact of such loss to children who use the hall, to their families and to the neighbourhood at large)
- The quality of the new space (and particularly whether the qualities of light and space in the existing library building will be improved, as the Council appears to claim)
- The long-term security of the library in its proposed new location
- The availability of proper and adequate, high-standard social housing in the new developments
- The sense of haste and urgency that residents detect in the Council's conduct of this matter (not least in the strength of the language of the 3 March letter)

and, overall:

- The risk of permanent loss of two important public spaces, which local residents feel characterise their home area and exist for common local use, to commercially-developed, private residential and in all likelihood highly expensive space in generic buildings.

In summary, the arguments that you make in your 3 March letter are not self-evident, as the Council has suggested, and deserve to be examined further, with much greater care. We understand that to be one of the purposes of a properly conducted consultation.

There is much concern that the Council has not taken proper account of all of the likely costs of its proposal – both financial and non-financial – to sell these public spaces. There is concern that this proposal is proceeding at great pace, towards the Council's preferred outcome.

Overall, there is severe concern that the Council is moving at an unacceptably fast pace towards permanently diminishing some of the few public resources left in the neighbourhood. We understand that this has even extended to the Council urging the petitioners against the development to present their petition formally to the Council as soon as tomorrow evening (Wednesday 8 March). Why such haste is required has not been explained.

We therefore ask the Council to:

- Allow itself proper time to consider all of the points made by residents, including the points made above
- pause the consultation process, pending the Council producing a more carefully considered proposal after consideration of those points
- allow proper time and opportunities for the community to be consulted on the fresh proposal (ie. to extend the consultation process)
- provide transparency at all times
- not to use Council resources to propagandise, eg. by alleging that critics of the scheme are “misleading” or providing “misinformation”

Thank you for your attention. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Alex Glassbrook  
Wandsworth Liberal Democrats  
Northcote Ward  
[alexglassbrook@icloud.com](mailto:alexglassbrook@icloud.com)