

Billinge Chapel End Parish Council

Minutes of Extraordinary Council Meeting held on 30 June 2022

Present: Councillor S Gardner (Chair)

Councillors A Armstrong, B Bates, C Betts,
H Broatch (Clerk and RFO Officer to the Council)

PUBLIC SESSION

18 Members of the Public were in attendance (4 advised that they were from Garswood)

- 1. Borough Councillors Betts and Peers were in attendance. Borough Councillor Peers advised that he had clearly stated his preference to the St Helens Council which was for the Library to be re-opened (as soon as possible after repairs completed) and for it to remain open as the location for a library service for the people in Billinge. Borough Councillor Betts reported that he had tried to get the report that would go to St Helens Cabinet Meeting on 13 July 2022 but it was not yet available. He also could not get a clear report on why the existing library building had not been repaired and his understanding was that COVID was not a reason for not doing construction works. He agreed that the building should be repaired and in the interim an alternative venue be identified to house the Billinge Library Service. So far two possible interim options had been identified Eddleston Centre and the Sure Start Building at Chapel End Primary School. These needed to be explored further. Both Borough Councillors agreed that a library service should continue in Billinge and that the interim arrangements could only be a step to something permanent.*
- 2. Members of the Public were then invited to speak. There was considerable frustration that it appears that the Library has suffered from “managed decline” by St Helens Council. This is evidenced by the failure to repair the roof even when closed for Covid, and since coming out of Covid, no attempt to make repairs. The difficulty in obtaining information on this was considered by many to be very unhelpful. One local resident pointed to Wigan Council doing repairs of one of their libraries during Covid, so why couldn’t St Helens Council? They all agreed that Billinge needed a library service and that the ideal location was the existing library building. However it needed repairs done and therefore interim solutions were needed and needed quickly. The most immediate solution was the mobile library (which could be parked in The Public Hall car park). This would enable interim solutions for temporarily housing the library to be worked up in detail and an agreement reached with a temporary host. In the meantime it was strongly felt that the closure of a library service in Billinge was to be resisted. The Parish Council and individuals should be making their views on this known to St Helens Council. The feeling was that Billinge was already at a disadvantage due to the fact the library was already closed albeit*

“temporarily”. Many were concerned that if the library was closed that the land would be sold for housing development which they felt was not sustainable.

Discussions took place about the fact that St Helens Council were under financial pressure having had a significant cut in funding from Central Government. If the worst came to the worst and the local community were not able to save the library it was felt that other alternatives such as community right to buy should be explored. Cllr Betts said that other options such as building at The Public Hall should also not be discounted although many felt it was unsuitable due to access limitations and doubts about it securing planning consent.

Overall the Public’s view was that the library should remain where it was and that the potential for right to buy be explored as a priority if the fight to save the library was unsuccessful.

No 32

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Barnes, Bradbury, Gill, Murphy and Wainwright and the reasons for absence were approved.

No 33 Declarations of Interest: no declarations were received.

No 34

Library Service

Noted the Chair’s summary of what had been said in Public Session that Library should be opened, repaired and provide a library service as part of St Helens Library Service for the people of Billinge. If this was not in line with the decision of St Helens Council, that community right to buy be explored by a Working Group to see if it was a feasible option and that it could enable the people of Billinge to keep a library service at the existing site. In the meantime, interim arrangements for housing a library service were to be explored further. Cllr Betts added that the option to build onto The Public Hall should be kept as an alternative (if needed).

Resolved that the Parish Council write to the Head of the Library Service reflecting the above and copy in MP, St Helens Portfolio Holder for Library Services, and the Ward Councillors Betts, Murphy and Peers.