

From: Benjamin Watts, General Counsel

To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities  
Cabinet Committee – 26 September 2023

Subject: **Petition Scheme Debate – Folkestone Library  
Petition**

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: Details of a petition received which will be the subject of a debate, in accordance with the County Council's petition scheme.

## **For Decision**

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### **1. Introduction**

1.1. In accordance with the Petition Scheme set out at sections 14.34-14.39 of the Constitution, any petition on a County Council matter which has between 2,500 and 9,999 signatures will trigger a debate at the appropriate Cabinet Committee.

1.2. The process for the debate on each petition is that the lead petitioner will be invited to speak to the petition for a total of 5 minutes. There will then be a debate of up to 45 minutes before the Cabinet Member is invited to respond for a maximum of 5 minutes. As the subject matter of this petition relates to a matter which is the responsibility of the Council's Executive, the Cabinet Committee can decide whether to make a recommendation to the relevant Cabinet Member to inform the decision-making process.

### **2. Petition – Folkestone Library Petition**

2.1. A petition was received which requested that Folkestone Library, Grace Hill be repaired and re-opened to the public. This petition had a total of 3,645 signatures, thus triggering a debate at this Cabinet Committee.

2.2. A statement from the lead petitioner, Bryan Rylands, is attached at Appendix 1. Mr Rylands has confirmed that he will be attending the meeting to address the committee about the petition.

2.3. A position statement prepared by the Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services and the Corporate Director, Growth, Environment and Transport is attached at Appendix 2.

#### **Recommendation:**

The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is invited to debate the issues raised in the petition, comment to the Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services and decide how it intends to respond to the petition.

## **Background Documents**

[Constitution of Kent County Council](#)

## **Contact Details**

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# Statement in support of the petition to repair and reopen Grace Hill Library

## 1. **History/location** for community needs

Grace Hill has a significant place in the history of the Kent Library Service as one of the first purpose-built community libraries.

The location serves the areas of greatest deprivation in the Folkestone and Hythe. Users include families on low income and many vulnerable individuals, as evidenced in our own recent user survey. Reductions in other public services mean that the library is in a location and building of enormous character and great potential. The Grace Hill closure has impacted on some of the most vulnerable people who continue to suffer the consequences, as reported in our survey.

## 2. **Communication** KCC<> community

Local people reacted to the closure with considerable anger. Many have no access to the internet and would not have seen statements online but would have seen news reports last year that the library "was saved".

Members have promised to involve local Town and District Councillors and community groups going forward, to help avoid fostering a cynical view of politicians and their motivation. **Campaign focus** on seeking a solution

The Save Our Library campaign has commanded remarkable support, including this petition. The Grace Hill issue has touched a national nerve of widespread concern over the future of the Library Service. Grace Hill represents the opportunity to buck the trend of decline and despair with a good outcome and a positive future.

We have consistently called for three positive things to happen:

### **Repair, Retain and Reopen**

The demands are not unrealistic, not impossible, not unaffordable. We have examined the facts in detail and with care: costings, architecture, surveys and strategic planning. The constructive meeting held between senior officers and a representative of the SOL campaign agreed that a way forward might well be found by working with local partners.

## 3. **Funding issues** recognised; funding opportunities

We understand the challenge of repairs as a significant element in the wider asset management portfolio, due to the constrained budget allocation and reflecting the KCC change of policy in 2011 from proactive maintenance to essential repairs only. As well as working to create opportunities for KCC officers and District Council officers to work together, potential funding solutions for a phased approach to a repair programme have been identified. Phased repairs would involve a far smaller cost than originally publicised.

## 4. **Community Expectations** - based on realism

Grace Hill can play a key role in the regeneration of this significant Kentish town. The expectations of the campaign are not unrealistic and our experience includes complex local authority project management. We feel no stone should be left unturned, no lack of effort should lead to the avoidable loss of a significant community asset.

Political leaders and Officers at the District Council are ready and willing to work with KCC.  
**We are asking KCC Councillors and officers to work with us to refresh the original mission of Grace Hill as a centre of opportunity.**

From: Clair Bell, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services  
Simon Jones, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Growth, Environment and Communities Cabinet Committee – 26 September 2023

Subject: **Petition scheme debate- Folkestone temporary library closure**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Summary: Position statement responding to the petition on Folkestone Library, the petition wording is “We the undersigned petition the council to Fix Folkestone Library and re-open it to the public. This is a Grade II listed building, which is probably the earliest surviving purpose-built library in the County. A library is more than a building: it is a symbol of community and learning. That is why the threat to Grace Hill is a matter of extreme concern for all of us.”

## **1. Position statement**

- 1.1 KCC recognises and appreciates the continued impact of the temporary closure of Folkestone Library for the people of Folkestone and the surrounding area and acknowledge fully the depth of feeling expressed locally.
- 1.2 No longer term decisions have yet been taken and all options remain open, this includes what is required to repair the existing library to enable it to reopen and exploring the potential for an alternative building in the town centre.
- 1.3 We have explored a number of potential routes for funding including approaching National Government and exploring other potential funds to bid through for example Arts Council or Heritage organisations but we have not yet been able to identify a suitable fund to bid for or funding that is available. We will continue to explore external funding opportunities including the potential to secure Community Infrastructure Levy funding from Folkestone and Hythe District Council.
- 1.4 KCC is exploring longer term options for the reopening of a town centre library and intends to update further when there is some certainty on viable options and how it will engage with the Folkestone community on these.
- 1.5 In parallel to this work has progressed to expand our current temporary library service provision;
- 1.6 We are making arrangements to provide some further temporary library services in Folkestone town centre in the Shepway Youth Centre, which is close to the original library building. We will move as much of the Folkestone local history collection as possible here, as well as provide public PCs, microfilm readers, photocopier and a free reservation pickup point. We expect to open this in November.

- 1.7 Additional public computers and additional birth and death registration location in Folkestone at Wood Avenue Library are now all available. We will continue to keep our FAQs on the library page updated with key developments as well as updating our social media and information available at the Folkestone libraries.

### **Background documents**

None