

Wickham Bishops Library – Our Aims



When Essex County Council (ECC) announced in 2018 that it intended to close its rural libraries, including our library in Wickham Bishops, the Parish Council set up a Library Working Group of 3 councillors and 4 local residents to examine what was being proposed and to advise the Council on making a suitable response to ECC.

The Working Group heard representations from many villagers about the important role the library plays in the community – particularly for our youngest and oldest residents. We quickly became convinced that the village's library service (which has run successfully in its current home for over 40 years) should be preserved and that it was equally important to save the building for the community's wider use. The building had been built by a local benefactor in Victorian times to provide schooling for village children. Subsequently it fell into ECC's hands rather than being retained for the village community. If it now became surplus to ECC's requirements it would be threatened with disposal and redevelopment.

You will have read that, following considerable pressure from multiple groups, ECC announced in 2019 that it would change its strategy and not close any libraries for the next five years. Unfortunately, the 'small print' said that for rural libraries, such as in Wickham Bishops:

- Communities would need to run their libraries themselves without on-site professional library staff from ECC
- Communities would need to find new premises for their libraries
- ECC would provide only a limited supply of books
- ECC would offer a total of £18,000 spread over 3 years to help those community-run libraries get established
- If, however, those local community-run operations failed then the libraries would still close

So really very little had changed. Our research indicates that libraries the size of ours in Wickham Bishops - we have 5,000 books (plus DVDs, internet access

and newspapers), over 400 active users and more than 900 books are borrowed per month - would not survive being run only by volunteers. To continue operating Wickham Bishops library would need to remain part of the Essex library service and have a professional librarian.

ECC advised in its initial strategy that, if it closed all 45 rural libraries, it would save £3m per annum. That would save 0.3% of ECC 's total annual services budget of £940million. The Working Group recognised that ECC, like all councils, needed to save money and was cutting services where it could, but we believed that closing libraries was a false economy (leading ultimately to increased social care costs). We believe instead that by working collaboratively with ECC we should be able to create a win-win outcome. The Working Group, on behalf of the Parish Council, is therefore pursuing the following strategy:

- Secure the building - by ensuring the site is controlled by the community in perpetuity
- Increase utilisation - by local groups running activities outside library hours
- Help ECC economise - by providing volunteers to assist (not replace) the professional library staff

Today we are showcasing some examples of community activities that are planned to run in the library. You may have more ideas or would be able to join our volunteer list – let us know!

If we are to succeed in these aims the Library Working Group and the Parish Council will need your continued support and, in particular, we expect to need legal and accounting expertise in the near future. We will also need active participation in the community clubs that are being established and, of course, your continued use of the library service and all that it has to offer. **Remember - whatever the newspaper headline may have said - your library is not secure from closure.**

We can be contacted at wblibrarywg@gmail.com

*The Library Working Group
(working on behalf of the Parish Council)*

19th October 2019