



Hon Sec Jackie O'Kane



Dear Cabinet member,

I enclose a Business Case for your formal consideration, as to why Kent Elms Library should become the hub library for the West of Southend.

I and the Friends of Kent Elms Library have no interest in blame or political arguments, but simply working to the recent report and illustrating why we are best placed to serve as a hub for the West.

We reserve the right to make answer to any anti points made during the formal consultation.

We have no anti Leigh sentiments and hope that they will continue to thrive for their community.

Sincerely

Jackie O'Kane.

Hon Secretary

Friends of Kent Elms Library

## **1: INTRODUCTION: KENT ELMS LIBRARY**

In 2014, Kent Elms Library will celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its opening. Always a popular and much respected branch library, over the last five years it has been transformed from an affectionately regarded aspect of its community into something vital for the health and wellbeing of its community.

Visits to libraries across the UK have dropped 6.7% over the course of the last five years- visits and issues, even in Southend, are generally declining. However, in the period from 2008-2011 the number of annual visits to Kent Elms Library have risen by 25.9%, a steady year-on-year rise that bucks all national trends.

2008	-	74187
2009	-	78766
2010	-	87656
2011	-	93401

Kent Elms Library was the first library in the borough to implement RFID / self-service machines in the autumn of 2011: this was a huge change in working practise for the staff in the library, but the change was similarly profound for our customers, and it is a testament to the relationship between the staff and customers in this branch that our visitor levels are once again increasing. While issues have increased over the same period, it is important to note that our customers are increasingly using their library for reasons other than

borrowing books. The range of activities, events and meetings and opportunities for young people to gather, learn and socialize is, we believe, greater than at any other branch in the area, and this has been the case now for a number of years.

Of all the libraries in the borough, Kent Elms is currently the most cost effective at a cost of 98p per visit and 98p per item issued. For the first time in 2012-13, all Southend libraries were set income targets by Southend Borough Council- the relevant results are below:

	<u>% of target reached</u>
Kent Elms	141.14
Thorpedene	90.19
Southend	78.01
Leigh	64.51

These figures demonstrate that Kent Elms is a flourishing library, a library supported by its community, and a library that- even in the current economic climate- can be a strong and viable economic asset for the council.



It is worth stressing that the branch is currently only open for 41 hours per week (across 4 ½ days)- if the library were opened for longer, figures for issues and visits would increase dramatically. (Despite the library's very close ties with local schools and heavy usage by young people- which will be looked at later in this document- the library is currently only open during the afternoon on 3 weekdays, severely limiting access to the library for school age children. One of the most exciting side effects of Kent Elms becoming the Hub library for the West of Southend would be the increase in opening hours, giving children far more opportunities to use the library.)

## **2: A COMMUNITY HUB RATHER THAN A COMMUNITY LIBRARY**

We have established this branch as the 'Hub' of our community over the last few years- we pride ourselves on offering a safe and comfortable environment, an environment which is welcoming to all sectors of the community but especially so for children and vulnerable adults. We do not believe a 'community' library would thrive in this area, and once the initial novelty of a volunteer-led library in this area has worn off, Eastwood will be left with either no easy access to a library service whatsoever or a severely compromised service. We believe passionately in the provision of an exceptional library service for all and we think it unlikely that the standards that have been set in this

branch can be maintained by its transition into being a Community Library.

*'I feel certain that a Kent Elms Library run by volunteers, however willingly, would inevitably lead to its closure very soon' (Mrs Peters SS9 5SH)*



### **3: LEIGH AND KENT ELMS**

The communities in Leigh and in the Kent Elms / Eastwood area have vastly different needs and requirements from their library service and ideally we believe both should be 'Hub' libraries- our argument though is that the loss of a professionally staffed Kent Elms Library to this area would be potentially devastating. Indeed, increased investment in Kent Elms as a Hub and an increase in opening hours would be hugely welcomed by this community.

Kent Elms, although transport linked, is for some, in a comparatively isolated area of the town, separated from Leigh by the A127 (and without easy bus access) and while

there is a bus service to Southend, the journey to the Forum would be by no means a straightforward one. According to AA Route Planner, the distance from Kent Elms to the Forum is 3.6 miles (the distance from Leigh Library to the Forum is 3.3 miles). Aside from the Forum the closest library to Kent Elms will be Rayleigh Library, 3.8 miles away (the distance from Leigh to Hadleigh, on the other hand, is only 3 miles). A trip to a professionally run library would thus become an 'event' for Eastwood residents rather than the everyday occurrence it is now. We would stress again that we do not believe a Community Library would flourish here- the demographics of this area do not suggest that a community group would be willing to take on an ongoing project such as this and we believe the Eastwood residents would be left with a pale imitation of the library service they enjoy now, and a Community Library which could wither and die within a couple of years.

We believe that if communities are to benefit from owning assets such as a library they must have the capacity to manage and develop them. The characteristics of the population of Eastwood and Leigh are very different- the community in Leigh is considerably more affluent, with the time and skills to help Leigh Library flourish as a Community Library. The Eastwood community does not have these advantages.

Eastwood is an area with much history but little in the way of amenity culture- there are no museums, galleries or other cultural institutions in walking distance- but what Eastwood does have is an exceptional library. Deprive Eastwood of its library and you deprive the entire district of its access to culture. A similar claim cannot be made for Leigh, an affluent town with many cultural experiences and learning opportunities. Kent Elms deserves at least one excellent learning hub where its youth, and the people of the west side of Southend, can have free access to sources of learning and cultural and social enrichment. **Invest in a Hub Library for Kent Elms and the whole area will benefit.**

Both the Kent Elms and Leigh communities deserve professionally run libraries, with council investment both financially and in terms of staff training- should a choice have to be made between the two exceptional branches, the impact of the loss of the Leigh branch to a comparatively more affluent community would, we believe, be less keenly felt.

*'Everything is taken away from Eastwood but nothing is given back' (SC Rivers)*

#### **4: KENT ELMS- ACCESS AND FACILITIES**

Safe and easy access to Kent Elms Library has never been an issue for the majority of people the branch has a large, free car park behind the building, and can also boast exceptional

disabled facilities (including a disabled access toilet). Bus stops are directly outside the branch.



The library has been laid out with disabled access in mind-regular weekly visits from special needs schools and children with severe and profound learning difficulties ensure that we are always mindful of the requirements of all areas of our community and are flexible in how we approach them.

The provision of refreshments in this library cannot be easily matched by any other Southend branch- as well as a coffee machine offering a full range of hot drinks, we also offer a wide selection of cold drinks: we seek to provide an environment in which our customers are comfortable and an environment they will look forward to returning to.

Kent Elms is not a listed building- it is adaptable and we believe it can be extended upwards to accommodate further facilities. The Hub for the west of the town should be comparable in terms of size and potential to that for the east of the town, and here Kent Elms is clearly the logical choice. The use of the listed Leigh Library seems to be regarded as a temporary fix with plans for a new building to replace it as the Hub in a few years- we believe this is unnecessary: Kent



Elms can be adapted now- the framework is already in place here for a truly exceptional Hub library.

*'I live in North Leigh but abandoned Leigh as a library, shopping or social meeting area because of the impossible parking situation. Myself, my children and now grandchildren have used Kent Elms extensively... and the adequate car parking facilities have made that possible' (Mrs Taylor SS9 4TF)*

*'The library is very friendly, easily accessible by bus or car, with free parking' (Mr and Mrs Melville SS9 5TR)*

*'As my husband is disabled he is able to visit on his mobility scooter without recourse to me as the only car driver- we do not have a regular bus service to Leigh so in order to use this 'hub' we would have to use our car' (Mrs Peters SS9 5SH)*

*'My son who has severe learning difficulties really enjoys coming to the library and using the facilities. He has difficulties communicating with strangers and the staff have developed excellent communication with him' (Mrs Blackwell SS9 4JS)*



## **5: KENT ELMS AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

The community we serve is a community of learners, and we regard our role as being, at least in part, facilitators in that learning. Eight local schools bring classes to the library and we try and develop those students into regular library users (one of the reasons for our increasing visit and issue figures).

We believe the library service should seek to level the playing field- this area does not have the economic advantages of other areas of Southend and we do not believe that the residents of Eastwood should suffer for that. Indeed the success of this branch over the past few years strongly indicates that there is a hunger for technology and information resources here, especially from young people, which cannot be easily satisfied elsewhere.

A balance is achieved at Kent Elms in our approach to young people- we have a vibrant teenage community who make heavy use of the young adult area and the computers, but younger children are exceptionally well catered for, to the extent that it can be a 'home from home' for them, a safe haven where they are always welcome to read and to play and to learn- our regular holiday craft activities are unmissable events for large numbers of children and parents have been known to plan their weeks around them. However, these events have other benefits- by nurturing the younger members of the community and making them

welcome and comfortable in the library environment, we are helping build further generations of library users.

*'I love making things at the library and go to all the special 'make it' days and the staff are my best friends' (Sophie aged 4)*

*'The library service is brilliant because when I brought food in by mistake they told me nicely that I wasn't allowed and this is where me and my friends hang out, so that's why I love it' (Jasmine aged 12)*

## **6: CONCLUSION**

### **The case for Kent Elms:**

- Kent Elms has by far the greatest rate of increase of usage of all Southend libraries over the last 5 years
- Kent Elms is the most cost effective of all Southend libraries
- Kent Elms has a free, council-owned car park, and outstanding disabled access facilities
- The library is already the cultural hub of Eastwood- it is a hub for the community run by paid, professional staff. We believe, however, that, unlike Leigh Library, it would unfortunately fail as a volunteer-run community library within a very few years (for reasons mentioned extensively in this document)
- If Leigh Library were made the Hub, access to a professional library would be extremely challenging for

Eastwood residents. Leigh Library is closer to the Forum than Kent Elms, and it is also significantly closer to its nearest Essex Library than Kent Elms

- Kent Elms Library is not a listed building and offers significant scope for development

An argument against the case for Leigh:

*Leigh Library is visited by more customers annually than Kent Elms, with, accordingly, a greater number of issues.*

**However:** Kent Elms is open for 7 hours less per week than Leigh (17%- approx 364 hours less per year)

The visit figures for Kent Elms have increased hugely, the visit figures for Leigh, according to the 'Year ending visits by branch' graph in 3.3 of Appendix 2 in the Report of the Cultural Advisory Working Party, have fallen by an even greater amount over the last three years.

Weekday afternoons are traditionally the busiest period for this library, due to the large number of schools in the area- Kent Elms has, however, always been closed for two of these each week (Wednesday and Friday).

**Conclusion:** Given that the visit figures for Kent Elms are continually increasing and the visit figures for Leigh continually falling, and assuming that the opening hours for each library be taken into consideration, we believe that in

real terms Leigh Library and Kent Elms Library are comparable in terms of annual visits and issues, and with the swing very much in Kent Elms' direction.

---

*'Both the Kent Elms and Leigh communities deserve professionally run libraries, with council investment both financially and in terms of staff training'- all things being equal, both libraries should be Hub libraries. However, as things stand, we believe that Kent Elms is the best and most logical choice to be developed as the Hub library for the West.*



