



Northumberland County Council

Tynedale Local Area Committee

DATE: 12 September 2023

Petition regarding the Falcon Centre, Wylam

Report of Strategic Estates and Libraries

Cabinet Member Cllr Jeff Watson

Purpose of report

To acknowledge and respond to the petition and update the Local Area Committee on progress made in addressing the issues raised.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Members:

- Note the petition received requesting support for the efforts of the Falcon Centre Action Group (FCAG) to secure the future of the Falcon Centre as a community hub
- Note the potential of FCAG to take on the Falcon Centre as a building to develop as a community hub.

- The issues raised in the petition by Wylam residents, their wish to see FCAG supported in their work to take on and develop the Falcon Centre as a community hub
- The ongoing work of NCC staff to support FCAG
- A library offer will be maintained within Wylam.
- That given the three years that FCAG have already had to develop a proposal, with little apparent progress, the Council, acting in the best interests of the service and the building should be exploring other options for the future use of the building in parallel with any proposal FCAG put forward.

Link to Corporate Plan

The Northumberland County Council (NCC) Corporate Plan 2023-26 has identified the core strategic priorities and supporting key organisational actions of which the following are particularly relevant to the Library Service.

- **Achieving Value for Money**

Libraries are constantly evolving to meet the needs of residents. This process ensures that NCC offers the best most cost effective Library Service

- **Tackling Inequalities**

Evidence is building around the therapeutic value of reading for pleasure, with libraries offering a lifetime's free supply of reading resources available to all. Library staff are a consistent presence offering support through reading in a space that is safe and free to use; provide a wide range of information and signposting which supports public health and wellbeing priorities as well as a programme of events and activities that promote wellbeing through social inclusion.

Libraries offer the space and support to facilitate social support networks through their activity and events programme. They provide supported access to information and signposting that enables residents of Northumberland to obtain advice and support, often within their own community, at the point of need. Whenever possible, they are "empowering our residents to do as much for themselves as possible".

- **Driving Economic Growth.** Libraries provide support and access to digital learning and skills for those seeking employment; access to space, resources, and expert knowledge for use by existing business owners and potential entrepreneurs for group or individual activity which directly contributes to economic growth and regeneration of communities.

Key issues

The Falcon Centre Building

Falcon Centre is the former village school that was built in 1910. It ceased to be a school in the 1970's when the school moved to a new building in the village. Over time it has been home to the village library, a railway museum and other community based groups. As of today the only the library and museum remain and the building is largely vacant.

The building has deteriorated given the limited use and whilst reactive repairs have been dealt with the building is not in good condition with a significant backlog of maintenance.

Background

The Library is the only NCC service delivered from the building, and it only occupies one part. It is open 12 hours per week which are staffed at the following times.

Tuesday 10:30 am - 12:30 pm / 1.30 - 4.30 pm

Thursday 10.30 am - 12.30 pm / 1:30 - 4:30 pm

Saturday 10:00 am - 12:00 noon (alternate Saturdays)

The Library Service have an agreement with Wylam Parish Council to oversee visitor use of the Railway Museum located at the same end of the building for an annual fee £ 1200 per year

The use of the building by further NCC services has been considered but no further uses have been identified. Further use of the building by third party occupiers would require careful consideration of the current state of repair and any improvements necessary to meet the requirements of the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards, which prevents the letting of buildings with a sub-standard energy efficiency rating.

Wylam Library – Service status

Emerging from the pandemic, the Library Service has reinstated usual operating arrangements at Wylam. The activity programme is recovering and can be supported as long as the activity takes place within library opening hours. Requests for use outside these hours cannot be supported by the Library Service. Two requests have been received so far in 2023 that have had to be declined.

Access to the Museum is similarly limited to library opening hours. The Parish Council were asked for volunteer support in March 2022 to enable the covid safe opening of the museum but with the relaxing of restrictions, the pre-pandemic model of library staff oversight has become usual practice again.

Sporadic antisocial behaviour has caused damage to the building and combined with the poor external lighting on the approaches to the building, this has discouraged library use after dusk. Hence the current pattern of opening hours.

A town Library is located in the Spetchells Centre in Prudhoe (2.9 miles away) but access by public transport is not easy

Previous Community Engagement and Feedback

During the Library Service consultation exercise which ran from December 2019 to March 2020, an information drop in session was held at each library. At the Wylam event on 21st January 2020, several regular library users and others attended. From this it was established that the priorities of those who attended focused on preserving service provision and encouraging children and young people to use the library. This feedback was noted as part of the overall consultation exercise.

The Petition

On 6 June 2023, Northumberland County Council formally received a petition from the Falcon Centre Action Group. The petition has a total of 98 signatories and requests the following option be considered:

That the efforts of the Falcon Centre Action Group (FCAG) to secure the future of the Falcon Centre as a community hub are supported.

(We believe the best way to secure the Falcon Centre for the benefit of the local community would be for the Centre to be run by and for the local community. The FCAG should be allowed time to develop a robust business plan in conjunction with other community partners. A future application to NCC from the FCAG for a Community Asset Transfer should be given sympathetic consideration.)

NCC Response

In response to receiving this petition, all NCC colleagues involved in the discussions that have taken place in recent years were consulted on their most recent contact with FCAG.

It should be noted that previous meetings have been held with FCAG about the future use of the Falcon Centre, during which they expressed an interest in taking on the building as a 'Community Hub' type setting and as part of this, enhancing the level of library service provision and access to the Museum via a volunteer network and ultimately a paid employee.

Initial contact was made with the Regeneration team in January 2020 to discuss a potential asset transfer. A Parish Council representative has attended meetings with the group as well as NCC officers from the Library Service, Strategic Estates and the Town Regeneration team, the latter's role to support FCAG in the development of their business case in preparation for a community asset transfer (CAT) of the building.

The FCAG were provided with a suite of documents in August 2021 relating to building condition, running costs etc. to enable a business case to be formulated. No further contact was received from the group until March 2022 when the group was contacted for an update. NCC was advised the group required structural surveys, a business plan as well as a wider review of community facilities in the village. At the

end of March 2022, the group were given a 6-month time limit to submit an application for a Community Asset Transfer, after which time the group was advised NCC would begin looking at alternative options for the site. No application was submitted by the end of this period and the group were made aware they could continue to develop their own plans if they wished and an asset transfer would be considered in light of any developments in NCC planning for the site. Meetings have taken place as requested by FCAG on an irregular basis

From a Library Service perspective, FCAG were provided with documentation in July 2022 to confirm discussions about the concept of a Library Service / volunteer / community group collaboration being able to realise the continued provision of a library service and access to the Museum within a community hub.

Funding has been provided by NCC to support the group in developing the feasibility work to assemble a business case. It is understood from recent discussion with the group that this work has not begun.

NCC Activity following receipt of the Petition

In response to a request from FCAG, the Library Service Manager met with representatives on 3rd August and subsequently provided a further document on the potential for the Library in Wylam with FCAG support.

Implications

Policy	Corporate Plan 2023-26
Finance and value for money	Dependent on outcome of future meetings and proposed solution.
Legal	As set out in the report
Procurement	There are no direct procurement considerations.
Human Resources	None
Property	As set out in the report.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes No	Not yet completed – dependent on outcome of future meetings

N/a	
Risk Assessment	Not yet completed – dependent on outcome of future meetings
Crime & Disorder	N/A
Customer Consideration	Continued provision of a fit for purpose Library offer in Wylam to meet the needs of the community
Carbon reduction	Current building is old and inefficient to operate
Health and Wellbeing	Benefits of social interaction and learning
Wards	Bywell

Report sign off

	Full Name of Officer
Relevant Executive Director	Simon Neilson Gill O'Neil
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Jeff Watson

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