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6<sup>th</sup> October 2010

Dear Mr Battersby,

**Rotherham Central Library, Walker Place.**

I would refer to the recent announcement that the Central Library is to be relocated into the ground floor of the new Riverside House civic offices on Don Street.

You will be aware that the Rotherham District Civic Society is of the view that the current Central Library and Arts Centre should have been refurbished as part of a revitalised and expanded civic centre based around Walker Place.

It is now over ten years since ABL Consultants first proposed the development of a new library, theatre, and arts centre on Forge Island. The Council subsequently proposed a £30.0m capital allocation to the project but in practical terms the project has not moved one step forward despite numerous consultancy studies in and around the Forge Island site.

In 2003 the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, and the museums, archive and libraries council Resource jointly published a report entitled 'Better Public Libraries'. The report strongly suggested that public libraries needed to better utilise the principles of good design, innovation, and creativity, if they were to reverse the significant decline in visits to libraries. Outmoded design and poor location were seen as key drivers of the decline. Many local authorities heeded this advice and sought to position their facilities both technologically and physically at the heart of lifelong learning and community regeneration.

To be frank Rotherham seems, for what are probably pragmatic reasons, to be heading in the opposite direction. Not only is it intending to split the existing libraries, archives, arts and museum facilities apart, it is proposing to site them in a less than ideal location from a public access viewpoint. The Society expressed grave reservations in relation to the planning application for Riverside House with regard in particular to pedestrian access and the narrowness of the Main Street canal bridge footways. As the Society remarked at the time *'the consultants deal at some length with pedestrian movement within the site and access for the disabled. However, not all people with disability, or mothers with toddlers and pushchairs, will be fortunate enough to be able to arrive on site by car.'*

By contrast the existing library and arts centre has, as far as the Society is aware, no issues or concerns regarding access, is close to the bus station, car parking, the market, and the central shopping core. A further point in relation to wider social, cultural, and educational issues can be made by referring back to the consultation process for the Town Centre Draft Interim Planning Statement. The Black and Minority Ethnic consultation workshop was unequivocal in its view that the facilities should be central and accessible, and particularly stressed the need to keep the library in its present position.

Four questions arise from the Council's decision to relocate the central library to Riverside House:

1. Is the move a temporary expedient pending the eventual construction of a new cultural centre containing new library and arts facilities? If so, how long is temporary?
2. Does the proposal involve displacing hundreds of council staff that were originally intended to occupy Riverside House, and if so, does this mean that the Doncaster Gate site will remain in Council administrative use?
3. What options are under consideration for the relocation of the arts centre, archives and local studies, and the York and Lancaster Regimental Museum? Each of these facilities require highly accessible locations, and to a greater or lesser degree highly secure fireproof accommodation. The standards required by the various national accreditation bodies are unlikely to be achievable, one would have thought, by way of a cheap short term solution.
4. Depending on (2) above is the former Doncaster Gate Hospital under consideration as the location for the archives and local studies section, art gallery, and regimental museum? If this proved to be the case, there would be logic in re-assessing the long term ambition to build a new cultural centre on Forge Island, and instead consider the development of a new cultural area centred on the former hospital and the Civic Theatre. In this scenario the public library would continue to remain separate but could possibly move to a more appropriate location such as the former Marks and Spencer College Street site.

The Society does of course acknowledge that the Doncaster Gate area suffers, just as Riverside House does, from the steepness of the approaches from the town centre core. This only goes to re-emphasise the reason why the Society was so keen to focus the future renewal of existing civic facilities on the Walker Place site. It was chosen with great care in the 1960's not only for its proximity to the central area but also for its obvious advantage of being accessible on the level.

The Society is of course at a considerable disadvantage in any comments it makes on the town centre in that it is not in complete possession of the facts. There is a feeling that Rotherham was very slow to grasp the regeneration challenge posed by the town centre, but acknowledges this was for the very understandable reason that it faced the massive

regeneration challenges, not faced by many other authorities, of the significant rationalisation of its coal mining and steelmaking industries. Even now, faced by the dire warnings of cutbacks by the present coalition Government the Society has no idea to what extent such measures can be counterbalanced by advantageous financial arrangements which one hopes have been made with Tesco and TCN Express.

The Society is convinced, however, that short to medium term difficulties cannot override the need for a coherent town centre plan. As a contribution to this process the Society would suggest a further scenario be considered which would focus civic, cultural, and creative activity on the Westgate / Guest and Chrimes area. In this scenario the previously expressed view that the Westgate Hillside be developed with Live / Work Units, and Westgate be occupied by the creative industries would come into play. The Guest and Chrimes listed building would be refurbished and occupied by the archives, arts centre, and regimental museum, as previously suggested in relation to the RUFC community stadium consultation.

It is quite clear that the securing of adequate pedestrian access to Riverside House, and the Community Stadium requires a pedestrian river bridge linked into Westgate. Rather than being located at the southern end of Westgate as provisionally proposed by RUFC's consultants, the Society would suggest it needs to be much closer to the town centre. In this regard there is no doubt that the key to the regeneration of the Westgate area is the acquisition and relocation of the Royal Mail Sorting Office, and the acquisition of the land owned by Satnam Developments Ltd. On this land could then be sited a new 400 seat Civic Theatre together with Civic facilities to replace those lost by the closure of the Assembly Rooms and the Clifton Hall. A riverside frontage would be achieved for the theatre much in the same way as proposed for Forge Island but with the potentially more impressive western outlook of Riverside House, Guest and Chrimes, and the Community Stadium.

There are any number of permutations which could be put forward, such as refurbishing the Guest and Chrimes frontage as part of a hotel development promoted by RUFC Ltd, and a complete Civic Theatre/Arts Centre/Regimental Museum complex on the Westgate site. The real issue the Society is trying to address is that current plans underway such as Riverside House, and those announced for the Central Library and the Community Stadium, are a job half done. Perhaps the real need is for an urgent completion of a revised Draft Interim Planning Statement to address the changes made since the Statement was first issued and subsequently withdrawn.

I would be grateful for your response at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,