



Elmbridge Borough Council

... bridging the communities ...

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Dominic Raab MP
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6 February 2024

Dear Mr Raab

I am replying on behalf of Cllr Coates and the Council to the letter received by email on Friday, 2 February.

You raise six points which I will address in turn:

1) How long has Elmbridge Borough Council been aware of the shortfalls in Health and Safety practice that led to the need to reduce temporarily operations at our Centre

Cllr Coates has set out **when** (November 2023) Members learned of the problems that had been identified in terms of Health and Safety practice.

The Council acted promptly and proportionately as soon as those problems had been identified. We have published regular updates, reflecting the openness of our decision making which you will find here:

<https://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/news/2024/community-services-available-across-elbridge-centres-community>

2) The assertion that a safe and functioning service was inherited from the Conservatives in 2016

I seem to recall that Elmbridge Borough Council was Conservative led in 2018/2019. I don't, having only joined the Council in 2021, claim to be an expert on its political history. Am I mistaken?

The underlying and important point is how did the problems identified in November 2023 arise and why?

Personally, I do not see any party-political capital in Health and Safety. Whoever was or is in political control, Health and Safety is the Council's responsibility.

We need, as a responsible learning organisation, to fully review the lessons from this experience not only to understand how the problems arose, but also to take the action to prevent a recurrence.

That is why we have commissioned a robust three stage review process which I refer to further below.

3) The need for a plan to restore the service

The plan you suggest is in place. Our management team is working energetically with Centre Users and volunteers on it and we are publishing **weekly updates** like this one, which will be updated for the coming week.

https://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-01/Activities%20Programe%20%20-%2029.01.24_1.pdf

4) The claim that the Local Plan has created a widespread fear of permanent closure of the Centres

I acknowledge that misplaced concern has been generated by some through the misrepresentation of the **Land Availability Assessment** which is a requirement of the Local Plan. As I have previously explained (v. our correspondence regarding the Claygate Centre in March 23) this is, in my view, a specious point.

There is no plan to close Day Centres.

The inclusion in the Local Plan of these sites reflects the obligation on us to illustrate how we might re-use Council sites, in the future, in a way which meets housing needs and re-provides for community use. All of which, if brought forward at a future date, would be subject to consultation and the full planning process.

As I say, I acknowledge the efforts of some to lead people to believe otherwise, thus generating misplaced concern, notwithstanding the actual position.

5) The demand that EBC should commit to continuing to maintain previous levels of service

As you know the **financial outlook for our communities and Local Councils is grim. After years of reductions in government funding**, rising costs and growing demands all Councils are experiencing financial stress. For some it is acute. Many are struggling to fund Statutory Services and are withdrawing from Discretionary Services. Or worse, falling over.

We are not doing that. We are not immune from the financial pressures, but we have a plan, we make prudent decisions, in line with our vision, in setting our budget and that creates financial resilience. We have set our plan for Community Services and it is a positive one. We are putting our services on to a sustainable footing for the future where the income we receive across the Council will be in line with our expenditure.

We are managing our services and budget in a responsible and caring way. We believe that is the right course of action in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. Bearing in mind the actions of your government, those reading this letter will draw their own conclusions about the reasonableness, or otherwise, of the demand you make.

6) *That an independent review of Elmbridge Community Centres be commissioned*

We have already had two independent reviews of Community Services, and we have now, as mentioned above, commissioned a **Health and Safety Review**.

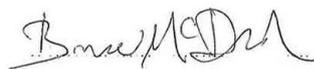
The first of these was the Ignite Study which, through benchmarking with similar Councils, demonstrated that we were spending considerably more on our Discretionary Services than our comparators which was not sustainable. That is part of what we are addressing through our Elmbridge 2030 Vision and our Transformation Programme. We set our present course of Elmbridge Connects following the Collaborate Review which was published in February 2023.

As I have mentioned above, we are commissioning a Three Stage Health and Safety Review Process drawing on independent expertise. You will find more about this on the recently published Cabinet Agenda. I confirm that the review will include considering the 2020 report you mention which will be published as part of the process. The report also recommends a full and independent audit be carried out by our external partner, Orbis Internal Audit. I can also confirm, for the avoidance of doubt that should the conclusions of the Review include a recommendation for further action, it will be taken.

I hope I have answered your points fully.

I repeat the offer previously made, not only by me, but by Cllr Coates, to meet with you to discuss any of these or other local concerns. We represent the same residents. I am sure they would prefer to see us working constructively together.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Bruce McDonald
Leader, Elmbridge Borough Council

Copy: Cllr Gill Coates