



ISLE OF WIGHT & VENTNOR LIBRARY PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT RENEWAL

FULL TOWN COUNCIL MEETING REPORT 34/25

11 AUGUST 2025

To provide update on the proposed library partnership agreement renewal between Isle of Wight Council (IWC) and Ventnor Town Council (VTC) outlining concerns, clarify expectations, and share the collaborative approach being taken forward, that aligns with Ventnor Town Council's current capacity and voluntary role.

NO. DETAIL

1) BACKGROUND

VTC currently supports the library in an agreed voluntary capacity, in partnership with (IWC). It is a shared commitment to keeping the library open and serving the community by:

- a) Funding one part-time staff member
- b) Covering utility bills
- c) Providing cleaning services
- d) Despite this modest involvement, the proposed renewal agreement from (IWC) includes broad commitments and responsibilities that it is believed exceeds or appears to cover excessive responsibilities over and above the (VTC)'s understood remit and resources.
- e) A meeting was held between (VTC) councillors and officers on Tuesday 29th July 2025 between Mayor Cllr Steve Cooper, Cllr Karl Hunter and Town Clerk Shelley Scothorne, Policy, Projects and Premises Officer Morgan Williams and Business and Voluntary Officer Catherine Hammond. Noting the wider councillor members who were unable to attend sent their apologies.
- f) During the meeting, councillors expressed concern that the current draft contract appears to be disproportionately favourable to (IWC). They emphasised the need for officers to proactively challenge and rigorously interrogate the financial assumptions, to ensure that (VTC)'s position is both fair and financially sustainable.
- g) Councillor direction on financial engagement was that officers initiate discussions with (IWC) from a zero-contribution starting point, aiming to collaboratively identify the essential operational costs. This approach is intended to enable (VTC) to review and determine its annual financial contribution based on transparent and justifiable expenditure.
- h) Officers are committed to undertaking further due diligence by reviewing the proposed commitments in detail. This process aims to establish a clearer understanding of the full scope and implications of the proposed agreement renewal, ahead of the next engagement with Isle of Wight Council (IWC).
- i) An initial deeper dive review indicates that the agreement is unnecessarily complex and lacks sufficient clarity regarding the specific obligations, deliverables, and expectations placed on (VTC). This warrants a more detailed examination to ensure that the donation request is proportionate, transparent, and aligned with the actual services and responsibilities being proposed.

2) KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Key take-outs:

a) Scope vs. Complexity

The proposed agreement appears overly complex and generic, particularly in light of (VTC) limited operational role, which currently consists of supporting one part-time staff member, covering utility costs, and providing cleaning services.

b) Ambitious Commitments

Despite (VTC)'s modest remit, the document includes broad and ambitious commitments - such as strategy development, market engagement, data sharing, and joint service planning - that imply a level of capacity, infrastructure, and risk appetite that does not reflect its current position. References to potential future accountabilities, including TUPE, further suggest misaligned expectations and implied future risks that require careful scrutiny.

c) Operational Clarity

While the agreement outlines general ambitions and principles of working, it lacks operational clarity. It does not specify who is responsible for what, when, how, or why, making it difficult to assess feasibility, accountability, or alignment with (VTC)'s capabilities.

d) Financial Position and Transparency

(VTC) is currently operating in recovery, and as its involvement is voluntary, it cannot commit to ongoing financial support without a clear understanding of the minimum operating costs required to keep the library open. As discussed, the proposal is to begin from a zero-contribution position, working collaboratively to identify essential costs. It also requests full transparency on all operational costs and clarity on (IWC)'s long-term strategy for library services and the Ventnor building, including maintenance responsibilities and future provision.

e) Shared Commitment to the Library

Ventnor Town Council (VTC) affirms its shared commitment to keeping the library open and serving the community, and expresses a clear desire to find a sustainable and collaborative way forward.

3) FOR NOTING

- a) This matter has been brought to Full Council as update to ensure all members and the community are fully informed, can contribute meaningfully on-going, and collectively support (VTC) in this matter regarding the retention of this essential community service.
 - b) The current ambition based on the information available now, is to pursue a simplified agreement that clearly defines (VTC)'s scope and limits obligations, to those directly related to the contribution agreed. This will help ensure clarity, manage expectations, and protect all parties from unintended commitments.
 - c) Access to Strategic Documents: (VTC) will request sight of (IWC)'s priorities, strategy, and terms of reference (even in draft form) to review alongside the agreement and prior to signing. This is essential to ensure alignment and informed decision-making.
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- d) Legal Review Preparation: In parallel, it will explore legal support to review the agreement (as permitted within the draft). At this stage, it will seek free-of-charge advice to ensure readiness once (IWC) responds.
 - e) Councillor Support at (IWC) Officers Next Meeting: This will be explored noting attendance will require all parties to follow agreed rules of engagement.
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