

The Kiama Woodcraft Group - Background Document

1 Background

- The Kiama Woodcraft Group stored its heavy, lockable library module at the Joyce Wheatley Community Centre during the 2024 refurbishment.
- Council staff advised that the module could remain on site and would be secured. The club confirmed the library module would stay at the JWC before moving out for the renovations.
- When the Group returned in late January to prepare for the February meeting, the module was missing.

2 What happened to the library module (Kiama Woodcraft Group account)

- When the library module was first noticed missing, the previous president contacted Employee 3 connected with the Joyce Wheatley Centre. Employee 3 reportedly said the box had fallen over, burst open and staff helped themselves to the books.
- The library module was moved by Council during the renovation period and later taken to the Works Depot.
- According to Employee 1 who witnessed events directly, the box did not fall open. A Council employee arrived at the Works Depot with a set of keys and opened the locks. The Group did not provide keys to Council. The locks were lightweight, so the Group assumes a similar key was used.
- When the module was opened, books were found inside. Employee 2, a maintenance crew member who wishes to remain anonymous due to employment concerns, reportedly said the books were valuable. He took a number home to protect them until the owner could be identified. These books were later returned to the Group.
- The remaining books were placed in a skip bin under a work order to dispose of items left at the Joyce Wheatley Centre.
- Employee 1 stated the library module remained at the Works Depot until approximately April and was brought indoors on rainy days.
- After receiving conflicting explanations, the Group contacted the Police Assistance Line. Police initially advised the matter could constitute theft and began an investigation. Police later classified the matter as operational error rather than criminal conduct. The Group accepted this classification on the basis that compensation would be considered.

3 Council's written position

According to the CEO's letter dated 18 March 2025:

- "Council staff have no knowledge of the whereabouts of the alleged missing books."
- Council denies staff stole or removed the books.
- Council states an internal investigation with outdoor staff found no books were taken. The Group notes this was not the NSW Police investigation.
- Outdoor staff the Group spoke with informally reported they were never questioned. Knowledge of the issue only became widespread among staff after the WIN News story aired.
- Council states that groups hiring community facilities are responsible for their own property and that the books were not covered under Council insurance. Council referenced a draft policy placing responsibility for losses on hirers. The Group notes this draft policy was not raised when tenancy began and that Council staff had expressly undertaken to secure the module.

4 Areas of conflict

Staff knowledge

- Outdoor and maintenance staff handled, salvaged and returned books, contradicting Council's claim that staff had "no knowledge".

Location of the module

- A Council employee told the Group the module remained at the Works Depot until around April, conflicting with Council's statement that it had "no knowledge" of its whereabouts.

Opening of the locked module

- Employee 3 told the Group the box fell over. Employee 1 stated a Council employee opened the locks with a set of keys. Police were told by Employee 3I that Council disposed of the books.

Disposal of contents

- Employee 2 took books home before returning them. The rest were placed in a skip. Council's internal report stating no books were taken conflicts with these accounts.

5 Communication issues

- The previous president experienced extended periods without replies to emails or calls.
- Councillors were reportedly unable to discuss the matter because the report had been declared confidential.
- One councillor reportedly said there was no evidence the books ever existed.
- Another councillor suggested the Group should not have left property in a "public place," despite the storage arrangement being agreed with Council staff.
- A detailed list of books and valuations was provided to the CEO, who described the valuation as fair and reasonable.
- The Group was not permitted to address Public Access or the pre-meeting briefing.
- The wording of the motion councillors voted on has not been provided.

6 Evidence available

- Statutory declarations can be provided by long-term members confirming the library module's existence.
- A statutory declaration from a staff witness is being sought.
- Returned books from Employee 2 and from the Lifeline book fair were identified using the Group's library markings.
- A councillor reportedly told the Group, "You haven't proved the library even existed." Statutory declarations will address this.

7 Compensation request

- The Group supplied Council with a list of books that could be priced.
- The original replacement value was approximately \$4,000.
- Returned books valued at approximately \$1,500 reduced the claim to \$2,500.
- The CEO advised that compensation could only be determined through a Council meeting.

- Councillors unanimously voted not to compensate the Group.

8 Broader governance issue

From the Group's perspective, the issue is no longer restricted to the loss of books but:

- poor communication after the loss
- lack of transparency
- use of confidentiality
- barriers that prevented direct and fair communication with councillors before the vote
- concern that confidential reports are being overused in a way that restricts engagement and accountability

9 Code of Conduct considerations

- Once Council staff moved the module to the Works Depot, the Group believes Council became custodian of the property, with responsibility for securing it, keeping track of it and notifying the Group of any issues.
- The Group believes the Code of Conduct should require:
 - transparency when community property is moved or handled during Council works
 - clear and timely communication
 - fair engagement with community groups
 - restraint in the use of confidentiality
 - accountability when Council actions cause loss

Rider

This document reflects the Kiama Woodcraft Group's understanding of events, based on information provided by Group members, Council staff and individuals with direct knowledge of the events described. It represents the Group's understanding at this time and is not intended to attribute wrongdoing to any individual. The Group provides this document to ensure transparency and accuracy. If Council can supply verified information that differs from what is outlined here, the Group will review and update the document accordingly.