

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Call-In Meeting – 14/08/2024

Call-In of Decision – KD5760 -List No.13/24-24 (published on 22/07/2024) Phase Two Consultation Exercise on a New Enfield Council Library Strategy

Call-In Lead: Councillor Edward Smith

Officer Response.

Reasons for the “Call in” are detailed below:

Reason for call-in							
During 2019/20 (prior to the C19 pandemic), the 8 libraries recommended for closure in the report had over 200,000 visitors (see Para.6 below) These numbers declined during the pandemic but are now steadily increasing again. The annual visitor statistics for each library over the past 5 years should be included in the report to provide a fuller picture of library usage. It is not known of course at this stage whether visitor numbers will ever reach the same levels as before the pandemic, but it is too early to say that visitor numbers are in permanent decline and therefore wide-ranging library closures are an appropriate response as suggested by this report.							
Officer response							
The number of visitors for each library from 2017/18 to 2023/24 is outlined below.							
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Ridge Avenue	72,220	68,929	58,205	0	30,288	47,713	52,928
Ponders End	43,463	23,152	11,120	0	12,106	18,658	27,024
Fore Street	89,887	63,127	55,661	0	22,812	19,535	39,571
Millfield House	5,593	7,121	61,098	0	0	15,521	2,160
Enfield Town	280,891	263,243	277,257	78,131	191,553	280,253	331,364
Edmonton Green	223,980	461,400	429,255	60,639	198,742	288,853	367,260
Palmers Green	266,459	259,216	252,350	23,282	135,074	179,379	200,669
Ordnance Unity Centre	165,246	165,246	142,121	65,709	65,709	100,755	114,467
Southgate	35,008	30,429	20,734	0	17,627	22,500	29,345
Oakwood	62,944	62,944	59,273	0	30,581	40,897	43,664
Enfield Highway	7,204	22,889	26,699	0	12,801	16,867	19,413
John Jackson	43,148	33,210	43,031	0	4,229	24,824	26,525
Winchmore Hill	38,904	35,292	37,208	0	18,227	32,498	35,239
Enfield Island Village	7,367	8,011	8,352	0	3,627	6,096	7,022
Bullsmoor	7,948	8,277	8,525	0	4,350	5,414	4,877
Bowes Road	7,405	8,120	9,981	0	3,455	6,679	7,076
We will include the visitor figures over the past 5 years in the strategic review for further information. While visitor levels increased compared to 2022/23 levels in 2023/24, it is still significantly below visitor levels for 2018/19 and 2019/20. The 8 libraries which we propose to retain as part of our review represent 85% of visits in							

2023/24.

We are experiencing a significant year on year increase in usage of our digital library service. The number of e-newspapers, e-books, e-audiobooks and e-magazines accessed annually through the digital library service increased by 2,046,200 when comparing 2019/20 usage to 2023/24.

To inform our proposals, the following criteria has been applied to make a recommendation regarding the future of the library and whether we should continue to provide a service from the current site, or whether we should consult on the closure of the library building. This includes visitor numbers, but it is not the only consideration.

These criteria are:

- Local need
- Distance to closest library
- Current level of usage
- Facilities and Resources
- Equalities
- Operating Costs
- Further Considerations (e.g., regeneration in the area)

We acknowledge that it is likely that the proposed closure of a library will have a negative impact on all users of that library, as it is the loss of a community asset. However, we believe that this negative impact is justified by the need to improve and enhance the library service at the retained 8 libraries, and the need to deliver the library service in a more efficient manner.

In the consultation, we want to gather feedback from stakeholders to further develop and improve our draft proposals. The phase two consultation will also help us raise awareness of the draft library strategy among stakeholders and explain the Council's rationale for the proposed changes, developments and opportunities arising out of the draft strategy. From the consultation, we want to understand how the proposals will impact respondents and their suggestions on how we can mitigate this impact and establish whether stakeholders have any alternative suggestions which make the same or similar levels of savings for the library service.

Reason for call-in

As set out in the EqIA attached to the report (paras. 45 and 51), the proposed closure programme if implemented would have a devastating impact on many residents across the Borough particularly for young children (e.g. the loss of the summer School Reading Challenge), school students who use the libraries in large numbers for homework, young mothers who use the Children's sections, and the elderly and disabled who may not have access to a car and who will have to travel much further to visit their nearest library. This would undoubtedly lead to a further decline in library usage and is greatly to be deplored.

Officer response

The EqIA does not use the word 'devastating' but does refer to the potential negative

impact on different protected groups of the proposed closure of 8 libraries.

The table below outlines how the proposed changes to library provision will negatively impact different protected groups and how we propose to mitigate this impact. It is acknowledged that despite these mitigations, it is likely that the proposed closure of a library will have a negative impact on all users of that library, as it is the loss of a community asset. However, we believe that this negative impact is justified by the need to improve and enhance the library service at the retained 8 libraries, and the need to deliver the library service in a more efficient manner.

The mitigating actions we have identified are:

Potential negative impact	Action required to mitigate the potential negative impact
<p>The proposed closure of libraries will impact protected groups who are current library users, and any person who wishes to access our library provision.</p> <p>The groups most likely to be disproportionately impacted are disabled people, older people and families with infants, young children or disabled children.</p>	<p>Alternative Libraries There will be a network of 8 libraries across the borough that are available for everyone to access.</p> <p>We will update the library website with bus and train information, as well as local car parking arrangements, for each library.</p> <p>The library service will offer familiarisation visits for those who may feel anxious about visiting new libraries. This could help them to feel welcome visiting other libraries, encourage them to attend groups and activities and to help with the adjustment to the loss of their familiar library space.</p> <p>Digital Library Service We have a digital library service, which enables library users to access free e-learning, e-books, e-audiobooks, e-newspapers and e-magazines on their digital devices at home.</p> <p>We will continue to promote awareness of our digital service, providing training for customers on how they can use it access the digital library offer at their convenience.</p> <p>Library Consortium Enfield library users can use their library cards at 22 local authorities' libraries, including neighbouring authorities: Waltham Forest, Haringey and Essex.</p> <p>Home Library Service If a resident has a mobility, disability or caring</p>

	<p>responsibility that would make it difficult to visit an alternative library, the Royal Volunteer Service can deliver services on our behalf to their home. There is no charge for this service and the Royal Voluntary Service visits our home library users once every two weeks.</p>
<p>The proposed closure of libraries will impact some disabled people, older people and families with infants and young children who will need to travel to different libraries.</p> <p>Some may find it difficult to travel to alternative libraries if they are required to walk certain distances, travel longer distances or take a journey which requires them to change buses or trains to get to a library.</p> <p>There may also be financial barriers for people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage to travelling to alternative libraries.</p>	<p>Signposting on the Council website We will update the library website with bus and train information, as well as local car parking arrangements, for each library.</p> <p>Eligibility for free public transport People aged over 60, disabled people, and children under 10 are eligible for a free travel with an Oyster photocard, this enables them to travel for free on TFL services (for people aged 60+ this is from 09:00 weekdays and anytime on weekends or bank holidays). This mitigates against the cost of travelling to alternative libraries for children, older people and disabled people who are able to travel.</p> <p>Digital Library Service We have a digital library service, which enables library users to access free e-learning, e-books, e-audiobooks, e-newspapers and e-magazines on their digital devices at home.</p> <p>We will continue to promote awareness of our digital service, providing training for customers on how they can use it to access the digital library offer at their convenience.</p> <p>Home Library Service If a resident has a mobility, disability or caring responsibility that would make it difficult to visit an alternative library, the Royal Voluntary Service can deliver services on our behalf to their home. There is no charge for this service and the Royal Voluntary Service visits our home library users once every two weeks.</p>
<p>Some groups who are more likely to experience social isolation, (such as older people, carers and disabled people), and rely on regular visits to their local library for social connection. This will negatively impact those whose local library is proposed to close.</p>	<p>Alternative Libraries There will be a network of 8 libraries across the borough that are available for everyone to access.</p> <p>The library service will offer familiarisation visits for those who may feel anxious about visiting new libraries. This could help them to</p>

	<p>feel welcome visiting other libraries, encourage them to attend groups and activities and to help with the adjustment to the loss of their familiar library space.</p> <p>Staff will signpost vulnerable residents to additional support agencies.</p>
Local schools and nurseries will be negatively impacted if the library they visit is proposed to close.	<p>Alternative Libraries We will consult with schools and nurseries to understand how they will be impacted by the proposed closure of libraries and how we can support them to arrange class visits at alternative provision.</p> <p>As part of the delivery of the strategy, we will increase our partnership working and outreach with schools and early years providers to support literacy development in Enfield.</p>
Local voluntary and community sector organisations, partners and businesses which use a library that is proposed to close will be negatively impacted.	<p>Tailored support We will consult with voluntary and community sector organisations, partners and businesses to support them to use alternative libraries across the borough.</p>
The proposed closure of libraries may lead to an increase in users of the Home Library Service.	<p>Home Library Service We will monitor any increases in usage of the home library service and if necessary, target resources to support any increase in demand.</p>
The proposed closure of libraries may lead to an increase in users of the Digital Library Service.	<p>Promote Digital Library Service We have a digital library service, which enables library users to access free e-learning, e-books, e-audiobooks, e-newspapers and e-magazines on their digital devices at home.</p> <p>We will continue to promote awareness of our digital service, providing training for customers on how they can use it to access the digital library offer at their convenience.</p>

From the consultation, we want to understand how the proposals will impact respondents and their suggestions on how we can mitigate this impact and establish whether stakeholders have any alternative suggestions which make the same or similar level of savings for the library service.

Reason for call-in

The report states that over 1000 responses were received to the Phase 1 Consultation and many residents praised the existing Library Service in glowing terms. Respondents made a number of helpful proposals to save costs and increase

commercial income. But no one recommended a significant reduction in the number of the Borough's libraries. This demonstrates yet again that the Council is not willing to listen to the result of consultations when the public response differs from its preferred course of action.

Officer response

We have responded to the feedback in the phase one engagement and considered how using these ideas, we could deliver our library service more efficiently and make savings to our library budget.

We have outlined below how we have considered and responded to the most common suggestions.

Increasing commercial income (29%)

In the draft strategy we have outlined how we will look to further generate commercial income from our library service. For example, we are reviewing our practices for printing, photocopying and scanning and exploring introducing charges which will generate commercial income. Our proposed model will ensure that the library service continues to generate its main sources of commercial incomes, such as Visa Verification.

In the phase one engagement, respondents suggested that we could generate commercial income through hiring out spaces in the library buildings. However, very few of Enfield's libraries currently have appropriate spaces for hire or co-location without significant investment in maintenance, access and reconfiguration of the buildings. This limits the amount of commercial income we can currently generate from the library service. As part of the draft strategy, we outline our ambition to invest in our 8 retained library buildings to increase income generation and commercialisation.

Reducing opening hours and premises costs (19%)

To make the same revenue levels of proposed savings we would need to significantly reduce opening hours. This was not considered viable because it would be an inefficient use of 16 buildings and would still need investment for the maintenance work required in each building. We do not believe such a model would meet the Council's statutory obligations in delivering a comprehensive and efficient library service.

We have reviewed the opening hours of these eight libraries to ensure they are open at optimal times and in the table below have highlighted where we propose we will increase open hours. This equates to a total of 56 hours per week at these eight libraries.

To reduce premises costs, we would need to invest in the buildings to improve their energy efficiency. These costs are outlined in the maintenance work required for each building.

Increase volunteering, charitable donations, applying for grant funding and lobbying central government (14%)

To support the sustainable delivery of the library service, we aim to further increase income through commercial activities, applying for grants and seeking opportunities to be commissioned to support the delivery of other services.

Our volunteers provide an invaluable contribution to our library service in addition to paid library staff, providing over 10,000 hours of support per year. The roles of volunteers include delivering our home library service, being ICT buddies and supporting baby and toddler rhyme times. As part of the draft strategy, we want to continue to promote our volunteer offer at our libraries in order to increase participation and complement the service delivered by our library workforce.

Simply, replacing staff with volunteers would not achieve the same level of savings as our proposed approach, as the Council would still need to fund the operating and repair and maintenance costs of the buildings and undertake the necessary repairs and maintenance work. However, we welcome all alternative suggestions on the role of volunteers from stakeholders during the consultation process.

Reason for call-in

Significantly, there is no reference in the report to the previous review of the Library Service which took place a few years ago and led to the recruitment of over 90 volunteers and the introduction of a wide range of income-generating activities in our libraries. This achieved a substantial reduction in the cost of the Library Service that is now unfortunately facing further draconian cuts under the latest proposals.

Officer response

We review our library service each year to find ways to drive best value such as finding new contracts to deliver such as visa verification, pro-actively renting out our spaces to partners and groups, being part of a stock buying and sharing consortium and seeking funding such as S106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Our library service is currently supported by 10,000 hours of volunteer time per year.

The Council faces significant budget challenges. For 2024/25, it was a significant challenge for the Council to find savings and income to meet the wide gap between borough need and government funding. And that challenge continues, the budget gap for 2025/26 is significant at £30m, with a further gap of £56m in years up until 2028/29. It is in this context that the consultation on the draft library strategy is set.

Simply, replacing staff with volunteers would not achieve the same level of savings as our proposed approach, as the Council would still need to fund the operating and repair and maintenance costs of the buildings and undertake the necessary repairs and maintenance work. We would also need to first undertake the necessary maintenance work to support further increases in our commercial income across our library estate.

Reason for call-in

The report does not say what the current annual staffing, operating and routine maintenance budget for the Library Service is. So, it is not possible to assess whether the projected annual savings figure of between £570k to £630k is a reasonable and proportionate percentage of the annual costs. Nor does the report break down the estimated savings in future refurbishment costs (£5.3m) between individual libraries that are slated to close or the likely timescale for such expenditure. The estimated capital receipts from disposal are relatively small and highly speculative.

Officer response

It is correct to state that this information is not included in the report to the Cabinet Member, however it is included in the strategic review.

For each library building we have included in the strategic review their operating costs for 2023/24. These operating costs include staffing, premises (including rates and utilities), resources (including books, digital services, furniture, stationery, and transportation), and the income currently generated by the library. These are the basis for the estimated savings proposals.

The maintenance work stated in the review is required to take place over the next 10 years. We have included in the review the estimated cost of the required maintenance work for each library.

The next report to members, following the consultation, will set out in full the proposed savings arising from the final proposals.

Reason for call-in

The available annual visitor statistics that are not included in the report show a wide range of visitor levels between different libraries on the closure list. The figures shown below are based on the pre-pandemic information for 2019/20 following the introduction of the successful Digital Library Service the year before.

Bullsmoor	8,525
Enfield Highway	26,699
Enfield Island Village	8,352
Bowes Road	9,981
Southgate	20,734
Winchmore Hill	37,208
Oakwood	59,273
John Jackson, Bush Hill Park	43,031
Total	213,803

It is clear from the figures that many of the smaller libraries above are very popular

and should not be closed. These are of course 2019/20 visitor figures, but they should be achieved again in due course with adequate support and encouragement from the Council.

Officer response

The number of visitors for each library from 2017/18 to 2023/24 is outlined below.

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Reason for call-in

One outstanding anomaly in the report is the inclusion of Ponders End Library in the retained list which had 7,650 visitors in 2019/20. This level of usage is significantly below the visitor figure achieved by several libraries on the proposed closure list. One can only assume that Ponders End Library was saved for presentational purposes because it is located in the east of the borough.

Officer response

According to our performance records Ponders End library had 11,120 visitors in 2019/20, this was when the library was located in a temporary site as the new library was built. Since the opening of the new library building visitor levels have significantly increased, with 27,024 visitors in 2023/24.

We propose that this library remains open. Ponders End is ranked 6th out of the 25 wards in Enfield for level of local need. The ward has the highest percentage of children aged 0-15 (25%) and the second highest percentage of adults receiving universal credit (46%). The ward also has high levels of fuel poverty (18%) and adults with no qualifications (29%). Of the areas of the highest deprivation and need in Enfield, Ponders End is the furthest from a large library.

Proposal: Councillor Smith has asked that the decision is referred back to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Culture & Public Spaces.