

Protecting Enfield's Libraries and Leisure Services

Libraries

- During its most recent review of library provision in the London Borough of Enfield the Labour Administration has proposed the closure of eight libraries; Bullsmoor, Enfield Highway, Enfield Island Village, Bowes Road, Southgate, Winchmore Hill, Oakwood and John Jackson.
- Whilst there was a significant reduction in the number of visitors to all libraries in Enfield both during and after the pandemic there has been a steady and encouraging increase in the number of visitors per year to each of the libraries slated for closure. It is therefore premature to suggest closures of these libraries without more time to assess whether visits will once again reach pre-pandemic levels.
- As set out in the EQIA attached to the Cabinet Report (KD 5760), 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.
- There were over 1.3 million visits to Enfield's libraries in 2023/24 yet only a 1,000 people responded to the recent consultation of the service. Even within this small and unrepresentative sample not a single individual resident encouraged the closure of a single library.
- There appears to be absolutely no correlation or strategic thinking about which libraries will be closed, especially if visitor figures are used as the key metric. For example Oakwood library had 43,664 visitors, Winchmore Hill 35,239 visitors and Southgate 29,345 visitors all in 2023/24 compared to 27,024 for Ponders End. Whilst the Opposition is glad that the administration is keeping this vital library open (in a deprived area) in the Ward of the Chair of OSC and the current Mayor of Enfield, why not the same treatment for libraries with greater visitor figures?
- On a financial basis, the case for closure is weak. The amount spent on libraries is trivial in the context of the Council's overall deficit. The financial benefits of this closure programme are at best optimistic, at worst misleading:

- The figures for possible capital raised from sale of premises are based solely on the book value of these premises. There are no buyers in pipeline for these sites and they may not be forthcoming at all;
- Figures for repair costs saved on libraries to be closed are based on worst case analyses over the long term. These figures do not represent savings in any planned / near term repairs;
- The benefit of the revenue savings from the proposed closures are trivial and in no way match the cost to library users of the loss of these facilities. The libraries proposed for closure are the least costly to run. If the Council wanted to save running costs on libraries, it would be proposing the closure of completely different libraries;
- No estimates have been provided for the additional costs of keeping the remaining libraries open for additional hours.

General Benefits of Library Retention

Social and Educational Impact

- **Educational Resource:** Libraries play a crucial role in supporting education, with 76% of library users in the UK reporting that they use libraries for educational purposes, including borrowing books and using other learning resources.
- **Early Literacy:** Libraries are instrumental in early childhood literacy. According to a report by the Reading Agency, children who visit libraries regularly are twice as likely to read well as those who do not.
- **Study Spaces:** With many students lacking a quiet space at home, libraries provide essential study environments. In a survey by the Carnegie UK Trust, 40% of young people reported using the library to do their homework.

Community and Social Inclusion

- **Community Hub:** Libraries are vital community hubs. In a survey by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), 71% of respondents said libraries are important for bringing communities together.
- **Digital Inclusion:** Libraries help bridge the digital divide by providing free access to computers and the internet. According to the Digital Inclusion Survey, 24% of people in the UK used library computers for essential services, such as job applications or accessing government services.
- **Support for Vulnerable Groups:** Libraries offer crucial support to vulnerable groups, including the elderly and unemployed. A report by the Local Government Association found that libraries help reduce social isolation, with

64% of users saying they felt more connected to their community through library services .

Economic Value

- **Return on Investment:** Libraries provide a significant return on investment. For every £1 invested in libraries, there is an economic benefit of around £6.50 due to the services and resources provided to the community.
- **Job Searching and Skills Development:** Libraries are essential for job seekers. In a report by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), 26% of library users said they had used library resources for job-seeking purposes.

Health and Well-being

- **Mental Health:** Libraries contribute positively to mental health. A report by Arts Council England found that regular library users experience higher levels of well-being, with libraries acting as a safe space for relaxation and stress relief.
- **Combatting Loneliness:** Public libraries play a significant role in reducing loneliness. According to a study by Libraries Connected, regular library users are less likely to feel lonely, with 76% of those surveyed saying that library visits helped them feel part of the community.

Conclusion

Given the social, educational, and economic benefits that libraries provide, there is a strong case for keeping all libraries open in Enfield. These institutions are not just about books; they are critical resources that support lifelong learning, community cohesion, and economic development.

Leisure Services

- Over recent years a number of Enfield's leisure centres have been on the verge of closure due a chronic lack of investment over a number of years as well as the sweeping of disrepairs and poor standards under the proverbial carpet. We welcome the recent change to GLL and the benefits they have provided to leisure provision in Enfield.
- We also welcome potential future investment into a number of leisure centres which has yet to be announced but has been suggested in recent months.
- The above however does not absolve the Labour Administration of the chronic underfunding and part closures of numerous leisure centres since 2010, more recently Southbury and Edmonton leisure centres.

- Although there are no imminent closures of leisure centres the Opposition is using this OPB to set a marker for the future in order to hold this administration to it's word.
- An example of the above is the closure of Edmonton Leisure centre for the best part of a year. This has had a significant impact on local residents, users of the leisure centre and schools. A question submitted to this Full Council meeting illustrates this point:

“Swimming is an important skill for life and according to sport England statistics, is down 6.3% for 11-year-olds on pre-pandemic levels. The closure of Edmonton Leisure Centre has put strain on schools’ ability to provide swimming lessons.

Previously, many Edmonton schools would walk to the leisure centre for swimming lessons at no cost and a small amount of travel time outside of the classroom. They are now travelling to Southbury Leisure Centre for lessons. It takes pupils way from the classroom for increased travel time and puts pressure on budgets due to increased costs.

Each Edmonton School is around £5,500 out of pocket due to new travel costs. Will the Cabinet member commit to refunding schools for these costs, incurred due to the failure of Enfield Council to keep Edmonton Leisure Centre open? This money can then be returned to school budgets and spent on vital classroom resources.”

The above is also further evidenced by the fact that the administration has failed on one of its key manifesto commitments on free swimming, a policy which has only been actioned once.

General Benefits of Leisure Centre Retention

Public Health and Well-being

- **Physical Activity:** Leisure centres are vital for promoting physical activity. According to Public Health England, physical inactivity is responsible for 1 in 6 deaths, similar to smoking. Access to leisure centres can help reduce inactivity, which costs the NHS around £7.4 billion annually.
- **Obesity Prevention:** The London Borough of Enfield has a higher-than-average rate of obesity among children. Data from the National Child Measurement Programme shows that in 2020/21, 27.5% of Year 6 children in Enfield were obese. Leisure centres offer accessible spaces for physical activity, which is crucial in combating obesity.

- **Mental Health:** Regular physical activity through the use of leisure centres significantly reduces the risk of depression and anxiety. A study published in *'The Lancet Psychiatry'* found that people who exercise regularly have 43% fewer days of poor mental health than those who do not.

Social Inclusion and Community Engagement

Community Cohesion: Leisure centres act as community hubs, bringing together people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. According to Sport England, 72% of people believe that sport and physical activity can bring communities closer together, fostering a sense of belonging.

Youth Engagement: Leisure centres offer safe and structured environments for young people. This is particularly important in areas like Enfield, where youth crime has been a concern. Studies show that engagement in sports and recreational activities reduces the likelihood of youth involvement in antisocial behaviour.

Accessibility: Leisure centres provide affordable access to fitness facilities and activities for low-income households. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicates that leisure centre membership is often the most cost-effective option for accessing fitness services, particularly in urban areas.

Economic Benefits

- **Job Creation:** Leisure centres are significant local employers. According to the Local Government Association (LGA), the UK leisure industry supports over 200,000 jobs. In Enfield, leisure centres provide employment opportunities for local residents, particularly young people and those in entry-level positions.
- **Economic Multiplier Effect:** The presence of leisure centres boosts local economies. A report by the Sport Industry Research Centre found that every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity generates an economic and social return of £4.
- **Attracting Investment:** High-quality leisure facilities can attract businesses and families to the area, contributing to the local economy. The presence of well-maintained leisure centres is often a factor considered by businesses and individuals when deciding where to locate.

Support for Vulnerable Populations

- **Health Interventions:** Leisure centres often run specific programs targeting vulnerable groups, such as those with chronic health conditions, the elderly,

and those with disabilities. These programs can help manage conditions, improve quality of life, and reduce the burden on the healthcare system.

- **Elderly Population:** Enfield has a growing elderly population, and leisure centres provide vital services that help older adults remain active, reducing the risk of falls, improving mobility, and combating loneliness. Research by Age UK shows that physical activity can reduce the risk of falls by up to 30%.

Conclusion

Closing leisure centres in Enfield could have detrimental effects on public health, community cohesion, and the local economy. These facilities are essential for promoting a healthier, more active community, supporting vulnerable populations, and fostering economic growth. Keeping all leisure centres open is an investment in the well-being and future of the borough.

Recommendations

1. Keep open all libraries in Enfield in order to assess their viability.
2. Enter into low cost leasing arrangements with key community and interest groups if libraries are found to be not viable. This would still significantly reduce the financial burden on the local authority yet retain the commercial asset and keep the space open for community use.
3. If the Labour Administration does continue with their proposals for library closures then all staff that face redundancy are to be re-deployed within Enfield Council.
4. Encourage library volunteering by providing incentives. This can be determined by the Cabinet Member responsible at the time.
5. Work with schools and community groups to encourage greater library visits.
6. Commit to keeping open all leisure centres until May 2026.
7. Work in closer partnership with schools to further encourage pupils to use Enfield's leisure services.

8. Be more proactive in managing the Council's leisure portfolio to ensure that temporary closures for repairs are kept to a minimum to ensure safety is maintained and disruption of the service to be avoided when possible.