



Consultation on Croydon's Libraries

via Zoom

Wednesday, 10 April 2024

7pm – 8.30pm

Present: Elizabeth Ash (Chair), Elikem Agbenyeke, Dom, Ken Baker, Glyn Berry, Kate Clark, John Clarke, Ramesh Gandhi, Elaine Garrod, Jay Ginn, Jenny Irish, Henry Lelen, Clive Locke, Keith Nicholas, Debbie Playle, Doreen Soukup, Janet Stollery, Laura Swaffield, Paul Voden

Apologies: Mahbub Sadiq Bhatti, Pauline Childs, Linda Morris, Jo Quantrill, John Woodhouse

Welcome and introductions:

Everyone was welcomed. The attendees included those on resident association committees and a number of people declared being part of the [Save Croydon Libraries](#) campaign.

Laura Swaffield of The Library Campaign (TLC), a national charity, joined the meeting. Laura explained that the TLC exists to support local people who want to support libraries and sadly far too often those who want to stop their local library service being damaged. Find out more about TLC [here](#).

Updates and Notices

CCC are keen to attract new members and committee members.

Current [collections are being carried out for Purley Food Hub](#) and a [coats collection for the homeless is being undertaken for Croydon Nightwatch](#).

Please see website for current events and information.

Meeting purpose

The meeting was called because the council had planned to hold community meetings to engage the community. As none had yet been organised and it was approaching the end of the consultation, CCC decided to organise one so people could share their thoughts and views.

Croydon's consultation

The basic proposals Croydon Council is consulting on were explained, as follows:

Library Hubs - These would be Thornton Heath, Norbury, Central, Ashburton, Selsdon and Coulsdon libraries. These would be open 5-6 days per week, staffed for the majority of opening hours, and self-service is proposed at least four sites. Open+ (staffless) access is available in two already.

Community Hubs would be South Norwood, New Addington and Purley. The Community Hubs would be co-located with other services (where they share a space) and move from their existing position. The plan refers to community hubs as a space for book collections with wifi and computer access, and opening hours would include a Saturday.

Library outreach 'Library Link' would be put in place to cover Broad Green, Shirley, Bradmore Green and Sanderstead, which are the libraries proposed for closure unless a group or organisation will take on the running of the libraries at no cost to the council.

If libraries close, library services would be delivered elsewhere through avenues such as community centres, care homes, community events, schools, and “could include book collections”, etc. The home library service would be extended.

Points made in the meeting included:

- Croydon has a statutory duty to provide a library service for all who wish to make use of it.
- Croydon already spends a tiny amount on libraries and the service has suffered as a consequence.
- Croydon residents value the staff that run libraries and have little interest in staffless libraries or running libraries.
- People value libraries and have fought to keep them all until now. Closing libraries or reducing them will not be popular.
- As a result of the previous consultation, Croydon Council decided to keep all libraries open but for fewer hours to cut costs. The current proposal is to reduce the number of libraries but to increase the number of hours other libraries are open.
- The point was made that there is a forest of information produced so it is difficult to see the wood for the trees, but it is pretty clear that even if they close these libraries, the savings do not add up and plans will not work.
- The council has ideas put forward ideas they say will mitigate the loss of libraries but the proposals are vague and misleading. The council already struggles to get volunteers and could not get any organisation or group to take on the running of a library before. This is unlikely to change. Added to this, the outreach plans involves library staff and book stock and tech travelling all over the place to where the library offer will pop up on different dates in different locations. It's costly, will take a huge amount of organisation and resources and is highly unlikely to work.

Issues with the consultation

- Additional public meetings were promised but have not gone ahead as promised.
- Publicity has been extremely poor.
- People are unable to say what they want to say when filling in the online consultation document as space to comment is restricted and questions are leading.
- No children's consultation.
- The stats are incorrect in a number of places which is misleading. See later points.
- Questions are skewed – e.g. Respondents cannot say the changes will make their access to libraries more difficult only that the proposed changes would make them the same or better.
- Residents have been actively encouraging to fill in more than one consultation survey. Some are still unaware.
- Residents at a number of drop-ins were encouraged to discuss or put in plans that may cost the council money, yet the consultation documentation only asks for suggestions that are at no cost to the council.

- People were given the impression that local Neighbourhood Care associations would help deliver outreach, or that schools would. This appears to be untrue. One example was of a parent chasing this with the school that their child attends over the course of the consultation. The school had still not had any conversation with the council right up to the Easter break. Neighbourhood Watch is always short of volunteers to deliver their core service and has very limited space.
- Terms used are so vague, people are not sure what is proposed or are given the wrong impression. E.g. some believe that outreach means a mobile library. It does not.
- People are actively to fill in the consultation at events, not giving them time to consider their response.
- Access to paper copies of the consultation has been erratic, with some having easy access and others struggling to get access to copies.
- There is deep distrust about community engagement. People lack confidence that they are being listened to. Consultations have been skewed. Promises have been broken. Trust has been eroded. This consultation has not addressed that concern.
- Mixed messages – The council says the proposals are not about saving money but in the same breath says that they cannot afford to keep all these libraries open as they just don't have the money. There is a lot of talk about money and the finances, yet we are expected to believe it is about improving the service.
- The documentation emphasises 'active library users'. This term is misleading as it excludes anyone who does not use their library card. i.e. anyone not borrowing a book, returning a book or booking a PC. People do not count as an active library user even if they spend the whole day there or regularly attend, taking part in activities or an event, using their own laptop, reading, browsing or researching.
- The sheer volume of information produced is a disincentive to fully understand what is being proposed.

Issues with the proposals

People cannot necessarily easily travel to get to central libraries, particularly those furthest away, the elderly, the disabled, vulnerable people, young people and those with children would be particularly impacted if any of the four libraries were to close.

Co-location can limit the service - New Addington library was co-located some time ago, moved from the original stand alone library to share space in the CALAT (Adult Learning) Centre so is already following the Community Hub model. The net effect of this can be seen in the report - a massive drop in library usage in terms of library loans and library visits. Both are the lowest across the whole networks. Added to this, it is the most expensive library per visit. Residents warned that this would happen but the administration at the time ploughed on with the plans. The move also drastically reduced the adult learning offer at the centre used by people for training as a gateway to employment.

Library has a clear message. Hubs do not. People know what a library is and that it is open to all, free and without agenda. They know what the basic offer is. Hubs can mean anything and are not necessarily open to all.

No money will be saved yet the council keeps referring to not being able to afford to keep all these libraries open.

The four libraries up for closure will go on the asset disposal list if no one comes forward to run them. People believe this is the plan.

Stats

The Library Profiles do not compare the same stats for all libraries and although the council is aware of this, no effort has been made to correct this error.

There are also glaring errors in the stats and inconsistencies between documents. The council has made effort to find or correct these.

At one point Sanderstead library has been quoted as the fifth most used library but then when you look at the documentation it is not. Other figures throughout the documents differ too, making it very hard to get a true picture.

Anyone noticing anything was asked to pass details on to [the campaign](#) by emailing SaveCroydonLibraries@gmail.com so a record can be kept.

Key points on the four libraries considered for closure

Parking - Bradmore Green has free on street parking and a car park with disabled space. There is ample free on street parking at Sanderstead and step free access from the bus stop outside. There is free on street parking by Shirley Library and it is close to shops and bus route. There is paid on street parking by Broad Green.

Bradmore Green and Sanderstead library users would need to travel up or down steep hills to access the next nearest libraries.

Shirley, Bradmore Green, Sanderstead and Broad Green library users would require two buses to access another library. This would not be feasible in terms of time, cost, congestion at school times and rush hours, for the elderly, the infirm or disabled, those with children or for children to travel alone.

All serve a community which has no other public council building.

People spoke of difficulty finding meeting places and that the closure of libraries would increase this.

Broad Green library is in one of the most deprived areas of the borough.

Closing libraries will save very little money to reinvest elsewhere in the service but will significantly impact the communities served by these libraries.

Availability of dedicated library staff during opening hours/volunteers

Library staff are highly valued. They know the local community and library users well, They are skilled at helping people find what they need and understand the need for confidentiality. They ensure consistency in the service and provide a welcoming, inclusive space and a professional service.

The importance of library staff has been a theme in all consultations, as acknowledged in the council's own reports.

Open+ (staffless access) is not what residents want and the council's reports demonstrate this too. Selsdon library is open more hours using staffless access than staffed hours yet staffless hours account for just 4% of the usage.

Volunteers do not come at no cost. They require training, managing, and need replacing as people regularly move on. They cannot do many of the tasks skilled library workers can do. Despite efforts, Croydon has not managed to attract sufficient volunteers.

There was concern about confidentiality and a lack of professionalism with volunteers.

Volunteers can add value by fundraising or helping to organise activities, for example. There are a number of gardening groups/people to tend existing gardens or who have created library gardens.

Advertising

Libraries are not advertised properly. Advertising libraries and what they offer also comes up time and time again in consultations and meetings. It is easy and cost-effective to deliver if there is the will. It was one of the promises made but not delivered when Croydon last consulted.

Co-location and community hubs

Libraries are already community hubs.

Community Hub means different things to different people so the term can be confusing and has no clear message or standard.

Any co-location needs careful planning so that any other uses or services do not push out or reduce the library offer or limit the community's access.

Community Managed Libraries

These are being promoted as part of this consultation process.

There has been reference made to successful models during meetings and drop-ins held as part of the consultation but no actual concrete examples have been provided, despite requests for this information.

The council is looking for a solution to be at no cost to the council. The models out there vary widely, with some charging a fee for membership, some with council or parish council support and funding and staffing etc.

Upper Norwood library is not a community managed library. The building has been given to a local trust and the library service is run by Lambeth Council. It is funded jointly by Croydon and Lambeth.

In the webinar on Community Managed Libraries, people made wild claims including volunteers providing a better service than trained, qualified staff.

The webinar did not cover the challenges of setting these 'community-managed' libraries up, or even touch on how they deal with a myriad of issues including insurances, maintenance, bills, rotas, training, fundraising, GDPR, safeguarding and other policies, stock, systems, or any of the many other aspects that a group planning to run a library or building would need to consider.

Warlingham is a 'community-managed library' but it charges a fee, has parish council funding, access to the council's book stock and lending system as there is a paid member of Surrey Library staff on duty, supported by volunteers. They cannot get enough volunteers to cover the rota so are constantly advertising a call out for more to fill vacancies.

Laura Swaffield explained that community managed libraries are 'a sort of myth'.

"It's the sort of thing councils fall back on - Empower your local community.... so take over your library and run it entirely yourself!"

This has happened all over the country in a wildly uncontrolled way but there is no evidence whatsoever that they are sustainable.... There's no evidence regarding whether they are any good as library services.

People might club together and try to keep a building going, but it is fraught with issues.

Volunteers cannot provide an expert library service that people need, with help in finding information, professional standards, and everything else that a public library provides with trained, skilled staff."

Outreach

The outreach proposals were discussed, with plans for library staff to be running to different locations with book collections or to put on activities. Libraries are a focal point and very much needed. Once the library is gone, its gone.

There is more chance of reaching people and improving outreach through existing libraries with staffing.

Engaging communities

If libraries were properly promoted, communities may get more involved in libraries. For example, in Sanderstead a local builder has indicated willingness to do the work if the resources for an accessible toilet are made available. Others felt sure people would be happy to fundraise for extras to the core service or local companies could be approached to ask for their help.

Libraries could be hired out when not open as a library. A resident spoke of how difficult it is to hire a space locally for a meeting or a class or event. Community venues can also be very expensive.

Value of libraries

Discussions included that:

Libraries are important, especially for poorer, elderly people, disabled people, people with mental health problems, those who are socially isolated, for children and students, and for babies to access books and activities to support language development and learning.

Libraries are a highly valued public service used by a whole range of people of all ages and at different stages of their life.

They help address social isolation, connecting people with the community.

Even in Sanderstead library, noted to be in one of the least deprived parts of the borough, people go to study there, often with their laptops linked to the free wifi, sometimes staying all day.

Community events connect people, enrich lives, educate, amuse, inform and promote skills and interests. Young children get their first steps in speech and reading. Makaton is used in Baby Rhymetime.

Investing in libraries would provide a platform for all sorts of health events, arts and culture events, talks, displays, stalls, drop ins, information stalls.

Libraries strengthen communities and a sense of belonging.

The 10-year plan for 2019 to 2028 states that Croydon had developed a plan for ongoing investment and improvement of libraries services over the next 10 years and that libraries were at the heart of Croydon's cultural offer. Dismay was expressed that the closure of libraries was being pushed at the end of Croydon's year as Borough of Culture.

People found libraries quite an emotional issue because they are used libraries at different stages in our life. Even when we're not using them, people look forward to using them in the future or to their children or other people's children using them.

Libraries are already community hubs!

The term library is very clear and needs to be retained. It gives a clear message of a welcoming, inclusive space, open to all. Other terms just add confusion and may dissuade people from accessing them.

Libraries are the only genuine free space for people to go, stay, pop in, study, connect with others, meet, attend an event, access the internet.

Public libraries provide valuable information to members of the public and to businesses. It is so important but really gets undervalued.

As one person put it, "we don't need to justify the library's worth. It is obvious to everybody that the council trying to save money."

Range of things offered by libraries

Things discussed included:

Access to reading materials, information, research materials

Access to knowledgeable staff

Help

Access to information

Neutral welcoming spaces

Archives and special documents

Classes including those by Clear Community Web – offered in a few Croydon libraries, to get people online, help to use tech, to stay safe online. These would be popular across the network.

Spaces for activities, organised by the library service or by the community. Examples given were Health and wellbeing activities, including talks. Libraries have been used for community meetings, police drop ins, social, craft and reading groups, gardening clubs, places just to meet others, to feel part of the community, for meetings.

Activities such as fitness classes and relaxation classes run in libraries add value. People may volunteer to run them, as before, which was very popular.

Refurbishing libraries

The need for our libraries to be refurbished was discussed, issues raised included poor lighting; shabby, drab interiors and mismatched, tatty furniture. If they were vibrant inviting spaces more would be drawn to use them and they would provide a better experience.

Croydon Archives, rare books and local history

A person spoke about using Croydon Archives to find certain really unique sources. Older books and sources may contain interesting things and are of interest as objects in themselves.

The speaker made the case that local documents should be held or accessible locally. Perhaps talks could be held in different areas of Croydon using the archived material. Oral histories were important too.

Consultation and closing remarks

The consultation is open for another week, closing on Friday 19 April 2024.

There is a [Save Croydon Libraries campaign](#) if you're interested in becoming more involved. Anyone can write for the campaign.

Joining committee or getting more involved

People were encouraged to get in touch if they were interested in getting more involved or if they wanted to know more. CCC is currently looking for a Treasurer and a Secretary or people could join the committee as a general member. There are also one-off or smaller tasks open for people who want to help out less regularly or don't wish to join committee.

Membership

Anyone can support CCC's work, [by taking up membership](#). Membership renews on September 1 each year. Members have voting rights and are eligible to stand for committee.

Donations to support CCC's work are also very welcome! Details [here](#).

Keeping up to date

Anyone can subscribe to get posts via email by clicking the subscribe button in the sidebar of the website. CCC also posts on social media channels. Links below.

Meeting closed: 8.30pm

Croydon Communities Consortium

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