

84. REVIEW OF LIBRARIES OPERATING HOURS

The Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure introduced the report which set out the results of the public consultation around different options proposed to vary the operating hours of the borough's libraries and recommended an in-principle decision to adopt revised Option 3, subject to consultation with affected staff, as the best option for the Council to continue to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service within its reduced budget envelope.

The Cabinet Member spoke of the protection and support of libraries and highlighted that in recent years the Council had invested nearly £5m to upgrade and make branch libraries accessible. She also highlighted that the borough had some of the longest library hours in London in recent years. Unfortunately, due to the ever-increasing costs of adult and children's social care and the housing crisis which had pushed many residents into temporary accommodation, the point had been reached now where it was no longer sustainable to maintain such long hours, especially at times of the day when there were not many people coming into libraries.

In August, the Council launched a public consultation which ran to mid-October. The consultation focused on proposed adjustments to operating hours. This process was collaborative and evidence-based, looking both at library footfall analysis and feedback from residents, the Friends of Reading & Education (FORE) and other community groups.

It was noted that arising from the consultation there was a strong preference from residents and library users to maintain lunchtime openings, create more consistent hours and prioritise Sunday and evening opening times. A key change emphasised was that the Council would be keeping both Hornsey and Marcus Garvey library open on Sundays. The Cabinet Member expressed that the Council wanted to keep as much library space open as possible, especially for children and young people studying.

The Council had listened during the engagement process and were now proposing changes to the proposed schedule of opening hours which was contained in the paper.

Going forward, the Council were committed to developing a strategic plan to ensure libraries remain sustainable and fit for the future. This would include modernising library services, exploring more income generation opportunities and adapting to the evolving needs of our communities – particularly in the post-pandemic landscape. The Council were especially focused on engaging the next generation of library users.

It was noted that to reduce the day-to-day staff costs of libraries by reducing hours for now, preserved the investment in library buildings in recent years and reflected the value given to them as public assets.

The following information was provided in response to questions from Cllr Ovat, Cllr Gordon, Cllr Hakata, Cllr Brabazon, Cllr Brennan and Cllr Cawley- Harrison.

- The Council had carried out a detailed equality impact assessment as the needs of residents who lived closest to Highgate Library in the west of the borough were very different from those who relied on the Coombs Croft Library in the east of the borough. The Council had observed and worked within legal duties to understand the equality impact of the proposals and tried to minimise them for the most vulnerable residents and those who have protected characteristics in the borough. It was noted that alongside carrying out and developing the detailed equality impact assessment, the Council had also carried out a needs assessment and a six-week consultation to which 1376 residents responded. Engagement was wide ranging with each of the individual library user groups, schools and colleges and pensioner groups as well.
- It was acknowledged that the equalities impact assessment did identify a number of issues which specifically, affected young people, people with a disability, and residents who were from a black or minority ethnic group and led to consideration of option three where there were a number of mitigations to minimise and reduce the impact of the issues of reducing the library opening hours on each of the groups and these included evening opening hours in each of the main libraries for one evening per week and longer opening hours for libraries in the east of the borough where there were high levels of deprivation. The consultation feedback emphasised that there was also a consistency needed to opening hours including starting and closing times and also maintaining lunchtime hours as well.
- To manage risks of lone working by staff, there would continue to be conversations with Unison and staff on this matter. It was noted that continuing lunchtime opening hours was a one of the proposals put forward by library staff themselves and was also fed back to the Council quite consistently in the consultation process. In practice, this would mean staggered lunch breaks to ensure that libraries did not close during the lunchtimes and Council would continue to work with Unison and with staff to ensure any risks were properly mitigated and managed and staff safety remained the highest priority for the Council.
- Acknowledged that there were a group of people that used the libraries in both cold and warm weather and also as a social connection point. Alongside libraries, there was an initiative called the Haringey Welcome, which had been established this year to help residents overcome loneliness and promote social connection and provide warm spaces. It was highlighted that libraries formed part of that network alongside other organisations, community spaces and also places of worship, and these were places that residents could access who may be finding it hard if they if they were seeing increasing fuel prices and energy costs. The spaces provided a warm place and a safe place for residents to go, and also enabled a place of social connection and also a place where they can get some refreshments and take part in activities if they wished to do so.

- Responding to the important role that library study spaces have for facilitating homework and exam revision and IT access, it was noted that during the consultation process, the Council did specifically reach out to young people and to schools and colleges particularly in the east of the borough. The Council had listened to the feedback on this and subsequently had adjusted some of the proposals that were first set out to ensure that all of the main libraries remained open for a longer period of time for at least one day a week. In addition, as part of the development of the library strategy, which would start in early 2025, the Council would be considering how it can develop partnerships with schools and colleges across the borough to ensure that during peak exam period and the lead up to them, there were places that young people could go to study to ensure that the borough maintain exam success. The Cabinet Member highlighted that the Council already had experience of doing this when Marcus Garvey Library was closed for a period of time in 2022 - 23 and by working closely with CONEL had ensured that there was library space available there.

- Regarding the generational shift in the use of libraries and change in habits for information gathering and different ways of reading books, there was a need to consider that, since 2012, the number of visits to libraries had dropped from 2 million per year to just over 900,000. Although those numbers had started to build back since the pandemic, they were still not near pre-pandemic figures. It was further noted that during the pandemic, the number of people borrowing e-books and audio books has increased, and these changes in reading devices would be considered as part of the libraries strategy that would be developed in 2025.

- The Council were retaining the libraries in the public realm, and they could be used in different ways such as: community hubs, cultural hubs, and also could welcome new groups and cohorts of people who may not necessarily use libraries as places for them. These varied uses could ensure that libraries had a sustainable future.

- It was felt that the friends of Muswell Hill Library and those who gave input to the consultation, had all been listened to. Assurance was further provided that the Council would continue to work with the Friends Group to bring residents back in after the refurbishment and to ensure that it continued to be the creative and vibrant place that it was before it closed for its refurbishment.

- Responding to the query about what co production and engagement activities had taken place with friends, groups and residents to discuss the merits and downsides of Option 3 before it was proposed for approval at the meeting, it was noted that this was based on all the feedback that the Council had as part of the consultation process. The Council had taken forward a significant amount of consultation and engagement with both resident groups and with the friends groups of individual libraries. The Council has also reached out

and offered a number of meetings with individual friends' groups regarding the actual data and information that had been gathered as a result of the footfall and occupancy data that had been carried out in each individual library. It was noted that not all of those invitations had been taken up, but it was important to state that the outreach had happened. However, the Council did meet with some groups independently and had met regularly with the Friends of Reading and Education throughout.

- In further response to the issue of consultation on the third option, it was emphasised that the Council had further carried out specific outreach with specific groups, including young people, schools, colleges, pensioner groups as well to ensure there was a very wide and deep breadth of input and views into the option.
- Continuing to respond on the query about co production on option 3, the friends' groups had been clear that they did not want the Council to describe engagement work with them on discussing the options in advance as co-production. This view was accepted and indeed the consultation described as 'statutory' as required for this decision. It was noted that a whole range of sources of information had been considered to reach a balanced decision but the consultation could not be described as co-production. However, there had been significant efforts to engage and consult and take on board views, over and above requirements, which have subsequently shaped the proposals that had been compiled.
- There was acknowledgement of the challenges provided by groups around footfall data in the in the consultation period, which the Council had revisited and considered occupancy rates as well as footfall, demonstrating that the Council had sought hard to take on board the views and challenges of the friends' groups, recognising that they were advocates for libraries and want to preserve the service provided.
- With regards to data contained in on footfall tracker including the numbers going into the contact centres in Wood Green and Marcus Garvey, the data had been obtained from the Environment and Resident experience service and data considered on the numbers of visitors each of these contact centres got per hour and their average number of visitors per hour was between 10 and 12 in Marcus Garvey and Wood Green respectively. This did not significantly detract from the library numbers and particularly at Wood Green which had the highest footfall and occupancy. The Cabinet Member further expressed that having the contact centres situated where they were in Wood Green and Marcus Garvey, had enabled the proposal of an 'express hour' which would mean that both these libraries would be open from 9:00am till 10am in both of those sites. This would mean that residents will be able to go to borrow books or return them using the self-service machines or use the library for study.
- There were no proposals in the current budget consultation for new savings to libraries in the next financial year. The aim was to make libraries sustainable and put them on a sustainable footing for the future. In early 2025 there would be co – production work on a new libraries strategy involving library group

friends and the Friends of Reading and Education. It was noted that a key strand of strategy would be income generation. The Cabinet Member emphasised to Officers that this aim was crucial to ensure that libraries were able to bring in income to ensure they had a sustainable footing for the future.

RESOLVED

1. To consider the assessment set out in paragraph 4.1 and in more detail in paragraphs 6.60-6.79 of the Council's statutory duty under Section 7 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service.
2. To note the conclusions of the detailed Needs Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment and the potential impacts and mitigations identified in relation to these proposals, as set out in paragraph 4.2 and in more detail in paragraphs 6.36-6.47 and Appendices 1 and 2.
3. To note the engagement and consultation process carried out to gather public and community views on the two different options put forward, and the findings and analysis of that consultation, as set out in paragraph 4.3 and in more detail in paragraphs 6.6-6.35 and at Appendices 3 and 4.
4. Taking into account the findings of the consultation, the Needs Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment, agree in principle to implement new Option 3 as set out in paragraph 4.4 and in further detail in paragraphs 6.48-6.59 of the report (namely that, informed by equity as the guiding principle, longer opening hours are retained in those libraries serving residents who are in greatest need of the service) from May 2025, subject to the outcome of consultation with affected staff.
5. To agree to delegate the final decision on Option 3 and the operating model and hours of the library service to the Cabinet Member for Culture & Leisure, subject to the outcome of the staff consultation on the model recommended in this report. If changes in response to that consultation require significant deviation from the principles on which revised Option 3 is based, then the final decision should return to the Cabinet for consideration.
6. To agree that the findings of the detailed Needs Assessment, Equalities Impact Assessment and the consultation with residents and staff, together with earlier engagement exercises such as Wood Green and Tottenham Voices, the 2024/25 Budget Consultation and the new Borough Vision, should be used to inform the early development of the proposed libraries strategy, as set out in paragraph 4.5 and in more detail in paragraphs 6.87-6.97 of this report.

Reasons for decisions:

The Council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service for those who live, work or study

in the borough. The duty is supplemented by government guidance, which although not statutory, must still be taken into account. The guidance advises that changes to library services should be based on strategic plans and consideration of alternative delivery models, and on careful assessment of needs and consideration of impacts and mitigations.

To address how it will continue to deliver the library service in the context of both this duty and the Council's challenging financial position, officers have undertaken a detailed Needs Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment to inform the proposal in this report. Both highlight the importance of libraries for those residents facing disadvantage, who may rely more on libraries as safe, warm, welcoming spaces, where they are able to access information and free Wi-Fi, as well as books and other resources. These assessments identify important data about where residents with specific needs and characteristics live in the borough and they tell us who does and does not currently use library services and for what purposes.

The public consultation that was carried out between August and October 2024 has provided vital feedback on how consultees use the libraries and what they most value about them. The two options set out for consultation were based respectively on Equality (an equal reduction in hours for all libraries across the borough: Option 1) and Equity (protecting the longest opening hours and greater access to libraries in Wood Green and Tottenham, as the areas where residents experience greatest disadvantage and deprivation and may rely to a greater extent on the services provided in the libraries: Option 2). The two options were based on consideration of data about who currently does and does not use our libraries, patterns of which libraries are most heavily used and at what times of day and days of the week, analysis of socio-economic and demographic data in the catchment areas for each library, and operational and staffing considerations. The consultation document is attached at Appendix 3, which gives further details on Options 1 and 2.

Officers consider that consultation feedback lends support to Option 2 relative to Option 1, based on responses to questions about the two options and the fact that users of the libraries that would see a greater reduction of hours under Option 2 were overrepresented among consultees. The consultation findings together with the Needs Assessment and findings of the EQIA have resulted in officers recommending a number of revisions to Option 2, as a new Option 3 which is under consideration in this report. The revised Option 3 mitigates the impact of reducing library hours specifically including the impact on those with protected characteristics. The proposed revisions are as follows:

Maintaining lunchtime opening: This will enable continuous access to all library services, without midday interruptions. For this to be possible, the library service will need to increase existing lone-working practices, and this will be a particular focus of the consultation with staff and Trade Unions.

Reprioritising Sunday opening: This will enable continued Sunday access from 12 – 4pm at Marcus Garvey and Hornsey libraries. Hornsey Library has the highest Sunday footfall of any of the three main libraries and Marcus Garvey Library serves the areas in greatest need. Reprioritising Sunday opening in this way will allow the additional staffing hours that would have otherwise been required to open either Wood

Green or three branch libraries on Sundays, which were the original options consulted upon, to be redistributed to branch libraries during the week, which will mean that the amount by which branch library hours will be reduced during the week will be less. Maintaining Sunday opening in both the east and west of the borough enables us to respond to the organisational feedback about impacts of the proposals on libraries in the west of the borough with high usage, while maintaining our commitment to the principle of equity. Our data tells us that digital usage, use of free Wifi and PCs, and using the library as a space to study is high in both of these libraries, as well as stock issues being high in Hornsey.

Reprioritising evening opening: Under option 3, e under Option 3 compared to the original options consulted upon each of the main libraries (Wood Green, Hornsey and Marcus Garvey) will benefit from later evening opening until 7pm one day per week. Additionally, to create more after-school hours to support students who use library spaces for studying, the overall hours offered at Muswell Hill have been increased, as this was the most heavily used branch library prior to its closure for refurbishment, and enables us to respond to organisational and individual responses which highlighted this point. The Council has taken into account the feedback about usage by young people, disabled users, users of ethnic backgrounds other than 'White' and those who are working, and therefore, together with the proposal that all libraries should stay open at least until 6pm on the weekdays when they are open, it is proposed that there are also three additional later opening weekday evenings at the main libraries

Exploring the implementation of a weekday self-service hour:

Wood Green and Marcus Garvey libraries benefit from existing partners and security staff and so will have a self-service hour introduced each weekday except Wednesday, from 9am – 10am, subject to operational discussions with these partners. This allows the service to be compliant with health and safety practices as the building is already open and staffed albeit not by library staff and increases the overall availability of the service.

Adjustment to opening hours to increase consistency: On

weekdays, all branch libraries will open at 9.30am on the weekdays that they are open. Save on Wednesdays, Wood Green and Marcus Garvey libraries will open at 9.00am for an hour of self-service (subject to the satisfactory outcome of the action at 4.4.4). Hornsey library will open at 10.00am. On Saturdays, all libraries will be open 10.00am to 5.00pm. This is in response to strong feedback from consultees that simplicity and ease of remembering the opening hours was important in encouraging usage.

It is important that affected library staff are consulted before a final decision is reached on the operating model for the library service. Staff have been engaged throughout the development of the proposals and formal staff consultation will take place, should Cabinet agree in principle to adopt Option 3 as set out in the report.

While this review of operating hours implements the Council's agreed budget for 2024/25 onwards, Haringey Council remains committed to its strategic plan to develop a libraries strategy and put libraries on a sustainable footing for the longer term. There were many valuable suggestions put forward during this consultation and as part of earlier engagement and consultation exercises which should usefully inform the development of the strategy, and these will not be lost. Using the principles which

already underpin our Arts & Culture Strategy – Access, Collaboration, Equity, Growth, Lifelong Learning, Visibility & Representation – the Council hopes to work positively to develop the libraries strategy with all those who want to see Haringey libraries survive and thrive into the future.

Alternative options considered.

The Council could do nothing – not make any savings from libraries and make savings elsewhere: Consultees to both the original budget consultation. and the more recent consultation on library operating hours have requested that the Council should not make any reductions in the library service offer and should seek to make savings elsewhere. As the Council is already having to make significant budget savings across all services and is also already proposing to raise Council tax by the maximum permitted by law without triggering a referendum, and in light of the need for a fair allocation of resources, officers do not consider that the library service should be insulated from the Council's legal obligation to set a balanced budget.

The suggestions put forward by consultees as alternative budget savings, for example by Friends of Highgate Library (Shepherds Hill), have been considered by officers as both potential alternatives and additional ways of meeting the Council's continuing budget shortfall for 2025/26. However, some of these proposals would not in practice realise the savings suggested, and others have already been implemented, for example using libraries as polling stations and making savings in senior management across the Council.

As the 2025/26 draft budget report (elsewhere on the same agenda as this report) indicates, the Council continues to face a substantial budget gap, and all options must therefore be considered to enable it to achieve a balanced budget. For these reasons, the 'do nothing' option and continuing with the existing library service provision unchanged is not recommended.

Close libraries: Other Councils have had to consider closing libraries to make savings. In Haringey we are committed to keeping our libraries open and to keeping the buildings in Council ownership so that these important community assets remain available for public and community benefit, so this option was discounted.

Consultation Option 1: This option, based on equality, prioritised even distribution of available hours, sharing available opening hours equally between the large or main libraries and the branch libraries, as the existing library service does. This Option ensured a library would always be open Monday to Saturday, within reasonable travelling distance. Under this Option, branch libraries would be closed on two weekdays each and closed for lunch every day. Only Wood Green library would be open on Sundays. This option would have delivered all of the cost savings.

This option was supported by a slightly smaller proportion of consultees than Consultation Option 2. Consultees perceived this option as fair and consistent in that all parts of the borough would have the same levels of access to the service. However, consultees recognised that it did not respond to levels of need and disadvantage in different parts of the borough, which is also identified in the Needs Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment. Lunchtime closures were not supported and there were

mixed views about whether Wood Green library was the right library to open on a Sunday. This option is therefore not recommended. Consultation feedback is discussed in more detail at Section 6.

Consultation Option 2: This option, based on equity, prioritised matching need with availability of the library service, resulting in the library service in Tottenham and Wood Green being the least affected by a reduction in library opening hours. This option aimed to address issues of digital exclusion as highlighted in the Needs Assessment and to maximise access to the library service where residents may face multiple disadvantages. Under this option, there would be variable opening patterns across the borough, with three branch libraries open on Sundays. This option would have delivered all of the cost savings.

This option was supported by a greater proportion of consultees than Consultation Option 1, albeit only by a small margin, and was felt to be fair by consultees as it prioritised addressing need and disadvantage within the Council's reduced resources. Support for this option, based on the principle of equity is given more weight as most consultees came from areas of the borough served by libraries that would see the greatest reduction in opening hours. Amongst the organisational responses, the "Friends" group from the main library in the west of the borough, Hornsey Library, also supported Option 2 on grounds of equity. However, there were mixed views about whether it was right to open branch libraries rather than a main library on a Sunday, and residents felt that the variable opening patterns would be confusing for residents to remember and could drive down usage. The principle of equity behind this option is recommended but as a result of the findings of the consultation, Needs Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment officers are recommending revisions to the detailed proposals in Option 2, under new Option 3, set out in detail in Section 6 below, which is the recommended option.

The consultation document is attached at Appendix 3 and gives further details on Options 1 and 2, including full proposed timetables and design principles which informed them. The consultation responses are summarised in the Consultation Report at Appendix 4.

Alternative Delivery Models: Two other options were considered at an earlier stage: self-service and community-led models. The first of these would involve the introduction of self-service technology and investment in other technologies, such as CCTV. It would mean there would be times where library staff were not present at some libraries. The second of these would involve developing services jointly with the local community, although libraries would remain part of the statutory library network. In essence, it would mean a greater reliance on volunteers rather than Council staff to run and staff libraries.

These two options were consulted on as part of the Council's budget consultation during December 2023 and January 2024. Due to consultees expressing concerns about the potential impacts of these models in terms of safety and loss of librarians' expertise, they were discounted not explored further. However, the opening hours consultation gave the public a further opportunity to comment on these possible alternative approaches. A clear theme from the organisational responses to the consultation was support for the Council's decision not to pursue these options further.

and officers are therefore not recommending these alternative delivery models as a way of sustaining the library service.