

This is the response of the Friends of the Libraries of Birmingham to the consultation on the future of the community libraries.

In earlier statements we have declared our opposition to this £1.9m cut, which comes after a progressive reduction in the resources of the community libraries (and a massive cut to LoB), with job losses and significant damage to services across the 38 libraries. We maintain this view. This current statement, at the conclusion of the consultation period, concerns the specific proposals which BCC will be considering over the next few weeks.

The response is based on our consultations, meetings, visits to all of the community libraries, attendance at the four public meetings and other contacts and communications with users, staff and the public generally.

GENERAL ISSUES

i) Tier 3 (and 4)

- we see libraries in this tier as having a shaky future, dependent on the continuing goodwill, commitment and resources (including accommodation) of partners and volunteers. There is the prospect of calls for rescue to BCC, libraries slipping out of the public sector or folding altogether.

ii) Deprivation & the Ranking Criteria

- this issue was raised frequently during the consultation period, with many feeling that the criterion of deprivation was given insufficient weighting in relation to other factors on which libraries in the more affluent areas were able to score highly. Another consequence of the application of the criteria is an apparent north-south divide, with better provision south of the city centre.

iii) Proximity

- not given enough priority. The 4-mile maximum round trip to and from the nearest library is a high threshold. If you have a buggy, walking difficulty, want to feel it's safe for your children to walk to their library, need to do 20 hours online job-seeking each week or face a two-bus journey, distance is important and not compensated by having a high-tier library outside your neighbourhood.

iv) Benefits Verification by Library Staff

- if BCC is to continue with this, it needs to monitor it closely. The inevitable tension between benefits applicants and anyone involved in processing their applications is likely to be transferred to library staff - which is why they so dislike the idea. If this becomes aggravated, BCC must be prepared to withdraw - indeed it might consider dropping the idea now in the interest of good staff relations. Library staff across the piece have experienced a stressful few years recently, during the long period in which their, and their libraries', future has been under threat, with still the possibility of compulsory redundancy in the offing.

v) Children's Areas

- one of the best features of Birmingham's libraries. There is a risk of these disappearing as libraries - especially Tier 3 - move into smaller spaces or have to share their existing accommodation with others.

vi) **Opening times** - two issues have emerged. Firstly, while there was no call for community libraries to open on Sundays, many volunteered the view that LoB should be open on that day. This includes people who cannot get to a community library in the week and used LoB on Sundays previously (there is also a tourism argument for this proposal).

Secondly, with reduced opening hours, especially in Tier 2, and with many libraries closed for two or more days per week, the closure days should be arranged so that whole areas are not without any service on a given day, and the odd practice of closing almost every library on Wednesdays should be discontinued.

vii) **Professionally Qualified Chief Librarian**

- the development and management of a major city library service is a specialist role, not a general management job, as is recognised across the UK's library services. We need such a post, which should be at senior level within the BCC top management team so that the library service is properly developed and defended as a key element in the city's cultural and educational activity,

INDIVIDUAL LIBRARIES

i) **Sutton Coldfield** - the proposed closure was the big surprise in the package. One of the biggest and best libraries in the city, which qualified for Tier 1 under the criteria used in this exercise and is a key component of the town's culture and community, should be retained. The arguments in favour of this proposition are by now familiar. The Town Council's recent decision to put a substantial sum towards developing a plan for continuation of a library service should enable closure to be avoided.

ii) **Aston** - strong local opposition to closure. The view that designating Birchfield Library at Tier 1 is compensation for closing Aston is rejected by local residents. There is no benefit in providing a 'better' library situated beyond the manageable reach of many Aston residents. The alternative suggested locally, which we support, is to retain Aston and Birchfield at Tier 2.

iii) **Glebe Farm** - classing this library at Tier 3 and moving the Kents Moat service away from its current location would mean a very unsatisfactory service across the area. We support the proposal to designate Glebe Farm as Tier 2, using resource saved by not providing a service in Kings Moat.

iv) **Stirchley** - the plan to move this Tier 2 library into Stirchley Baths is not viable given the scarcity of space on offer. No dedicated library area, books stored on trolleys.

We hope that these views will be taken into account.

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FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARIES OF BIRMINGHAM

PUBLIC VIEWS ON BCC's PROPOSED NEW MODEL FOR COMMUNITY LIBRARIES

During the public consultation period so far, we have visited all of the community libraries to obtain the views of users and library staff. In addition we had many inputs to our social media and responses to items on our website and mailing lists. We attended, and contributed to, the four BCC public consultation meetings and some of the briefing sessions in individual libraries. We held a public meeting in October. This note summarises the key points arising from these and other inputs.

We have put these points to the city's 10 District Committees and asked the councillors to consider the proposed cuts at their next meetings.

SECTION A : GENERAL CONCERNS

i) many users were alarmed that **the package represented a significant and irreversible deterioration in the service** provided by the community libraries, both in quality and quantity, with opening hours cut, reduced advice and support from staff (there will be c. 24 redundancies), smaller spaces and fewer books in many libraries, a reduction in children's and other activities. The BCC consultation document refers to the 'excitement' and 'opportunity' of the new model, but the reality is that this is a cuts package.

ii) there is little, if any, support for **self-service machines**. They may fulfil the BCC aim that 'customers should be encouraged to undertake less complicated tasks such as borrowing and returning items', but users fear that the time for staff to provide the highly valued in-depth support to users in book search, research and advice will disappear too. The cost of these machines is £884K. This was seen as excessive. Although this expenditure would not be charged to the library budget, it will still be BCC money and the general view was there were better uses within the library service to which it could be put. There was a similar reaction to the idea of **unstaffed libraries** in a scheme called open+

iii) **Tier 3 libraries are seen as a sort of half-life**, neither quite in nor quite out of the public library service. They are to be run by volunteers and partners with a bit of support from BCC, probably moved into smaller, shared premises. While BCC's view is that this option 'gives communities the opportunity to lead, manage and deliver their library service' it is easy to see these libraries slipping out of the public service and folding altogether as partners run out of volunteers and/or funds, move accommodation or just lose interest.

iv) there was great concern at the potential **loss of the free community rooms** which most libraries provide for a large number of groups. Some libraries will lose these through being moved to smaller premises, but the biggest loss will be from a proposed change of policy to treat these rooms as an income stream, which could mean that many local groups will be priced out.

v) **the proposed charge for reserving books is unpopular**, despite the fact that children and community groups will be exempt

vi) it was felt that the application of **the criteria used to rank libraries for the purpose of allocation** to tiers was flawed. Treating all of the criteria equally meant that deprivation was given too little weighting and that those libraries which were better resourced at present were able to score more highly on a number of the criteria.

vii) on a related point, a number of users saw a **north-south divide** in the package, with more and better provision south of the city centre than to the north. Of the 19 Tier 1 libraries (the most highly resourced category) 13 were to the south of the city centre, 6 in the north. Of the 13, seven were in just 2 Districts in the south - Hall Green District with 4, Northfield District with 3. (Birmingham is divided into 10 Districts corresponding to the 10 Parliamentary constituencies. Each District has 4 Wards, each Ward has 3 councillors).

viii) **proximity has been considerably undervalued**. BCC's aim is that no resident should be more than 2 miles from their nearest library. In terms of round trips, 2 miles = 4 miles and for the many who have to walk to their library, or get a bus (sometimes two buses) this would cause problems. Affected groups would include children, the elderly, disabled people, jobseekers who have to do 20 hpw online jobseeking and others

ix) there is a concern that the policy of **encouraging/compelling staff to undertake work for other organisations** (inc. partners) will reduce the staff time available for library work to a considerably lower figure than that given in the consultative document

x) there is one particular item of non-library work which is deeply disliked by library staff. This is the **verification of information submitted by DWP benefit applicants**. Disliked because the applicants will perceive library staff as part of the system which will give or deny them benefits, rather than as helpers and sources of advice –the librarian's traditional role

xi) **there is scope to vary opening hours, but not to increase them**. So adding, say, 6 evening hours would have to be compensated by cutting 6 daytime hours

xii) many commented that **the community libraries and LoB should be brought together**. This will now happen. Our proposal that **the library service should be headed by a professionally qualified librarian**, with senior status within the BCC management structure, should be considered. Heading a library service is a specialist, not a general, management role and what we are proposing is standard practice across the UK.

xiii) a number of people said that they hoped that there would be **some reduction in the scale of the cuts** – otherwise what was the point of the consultation exercise? Others thought that BCC should have made more visible efforts to resist this aspect of the national austerity programme.

SECTION B: CONCERNS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL LIBRARIES

CLOSURES

i) Sutton Coldfield

The closure of Sutton Coldfield library was the most surprising proposal in the package, and the least acceptable. This library could rightly be described as the jewel in the community library crown and it contains a significant collection of records and archives relating to the town which should continue to be located in it. To say that the town is up in arms at the prospect of having its library confiscated would be an understatement.

Much work is being done to prepare an alternative to this proposal to be put to BCC, so that the town can continue to have a library service, not necessarily in the current building. The work is being co-ordinated by a group called The Library Lobby; the town council and many other groups and individuals are involved.

Two points need to be made. Firstly, it will take some time to prepare a proposal. Developing this is work of an entirely different level of magnitude from responding to any of the other proposals in the BCC package and extra time should be allowed. There is no external constraint which makes a rushed decision necessary and BCC should not be pressing for this work to be completed by the end of the consultation period on 27 January. If this causes problems with the planned library budget for 2017-18, bridging funding should be provided. One option would be to top-slice the £884K earmarked for self-service machines in order to provide bridging.

The second point concerns the agreed provision of financial information. The case for this closure was based on figures which showed that, apparently, the costs of running Sutton Coldfield Library were massively greater, on a number of budget heads, than those for running Mere Green Library. Those who use these two libraries regard them as broadly similar in scale and scope. The figures were, frankly, disbelieved by many local residents who attended the consultation meeting at Mere Green. At the conclusion of a long and heated discussion, a BCC commitment was given to provide written comment on these figures. They have not yet been provided. After being pressed, officers provided a minor amendment to the original spreadsheet which did not address the specific points made at the meeting.

After further pressing, we were told that our questions were 'irrelevant' and that we should 'move on'. It is not acceptable for a commitment to be made at a public meeting only to be withheld subsequently. This is not how a local authority public consultation should operate. The work involved in providing the information would be minimal, and it is essential for BCC to demonstrate that the (hotly disputed) financial basis for the proposal is valid.

ii) Aston

The proposal is to close Aston library and to designate Birchfield, which on the basis of the BCC criteria would be a Tier 2 library, as in Tier 1. One of the points made to us frequently during this consultation period is that for many, the location of a community library is as important as the facilities it offers. Aston Library - described

by BCC in its report as 'well used' - is embedded in the community it serves. People can walk to it from their homes, parents are happy to let their children walk to it to browse and do homework, it is not too far for many elderly people and some people with disabilities. This would not be the case if the nearest library was Birchfield. There is no benefit in providing a 'better' library for a community if it is not within manageable reach of many of its residents

A proposal which has emerged during discussions with users and others is that both libraries should remain, with the resources designated for Birchfield at Tier 1 divided between the two libraries designated at Tier 2. This would involve finding new premises at Aston, whose current building is to be sold. This should be pursued

TIER 3 LIBRARIES

i) Bartley Green

It seems likely that Bartley Green will close. Unlike some of the other proposed Tier 3s, no partner had been found at the time of publication of the BCC consultation document, nor had any potential new premises been identified. The library has a number of regular users, not all of whom will want or be able to drive, walk or bus to Weoley Castle Library. Efforts should be made to retain a library service here.

ii) Bloomsbury

For some time (c. 3 years) since the Bloomsbury library building was vacated and subsequently sold, an interim, and inevitably limited, service has been run from a bus in Nechells. This needs to be put on a proper footing, with the negotiations to house it in the POD at Nechells expedited.

iii) & iv) Glebe Farm and Kents Moat

The proposal is to designate both of these libraries as Tier 3, and to move the Kents Moat service to the Pump. Response at the South Yardley public consultation meeting, and campaigning by local users, has shown widespread opposition to these moves. Tier 3 libraries are low resourced and vulnerable, and the Pump is too far from where many Kents Moat users live. Both libraries are in areas of high deprivation where other public services and facilities have been closed. The communities concerned include many older people, disabled people, jobseekers who needed 20 hpw digital access, and others for whom a library is a vital resource which changed people's lives. It also provides a key resource to local schools. The proposals would result in isolation for many.

The ideal solution would be to designate both libraries as Tier 2. If this is not possible, and given that the proposal to transfer the Kents Moat service to the Pump was not supported, then the resource should be used to designate Glebe Farm as Tier 2 and to close Kents Moat.

v) & vi) Selly Oak & Stirchley

The concern is that the area comprising Selly Oak, Selly Park, Stirchley, Cotteridge and Bournbrook will not have a proper library service. Selly Oak library is to be downgraded to Tier 3 in much reduced accommodation and with a very much smaller collection of books. At the same time, Stirchley Library, although formally designated at Tier 2, will be similarly

downgraded by being moved into Stirchley Baths. Because this is a successful community centre there is insufficient space for a dedicated library area and so the books will be stored on trolleys and wheeled out in such space as is available during library areas.

When I visited, the SB manager outlined all the facilities & activities there which would be available to library users - but the latter already have access to them as they are next door to the existing Stirchley library. Some in the five areas will be able to drive to one of the four nearest Tier 1 libraries, but many others will be deprived (see the attached reports of the public consultation meetings). In addition, all Tier 3 libraries are vulnerable and have an uncertain future. These proposals need to be reviewed.

vii) West Heath

The proposal is to designate this library as Tier 3 and to locate it in Oddingley Hall. This is viewed by the West Heath user group as an unsatisfactory outcome to a long saga of unfulfilled promises to rebuild the demolished original building. BCC needs to ensure that a service continues in West Heath and is protected from the vulnerabilities to which Tier 3 libraries are subject.

OTHER LIBRARIES

Castle Vale

Castle Vale is classified as a Tier 4 library in the consultation document, which describes this tier as follows : *'This will be a very localized and specific response, to support new activity around library service provision. BCC will seek to support local communities by way of a one-off grant to deliver library provision from a new community venue.'* Castle Vale Tenants' and Residents Association is running the library under a 3 year contract from BCC. No further Tier 4 initiatives are proposed in the current package.

These libraries are as precarious as those in Tier 3, liable to slip out of the public library service altogether, being dependent on volunteers, free or low cost accommodation and funds when the one-off grant has been spent. Castle Vale is apparently not eligible for any funding in the new model because it has already had a grant. BCC should consider giving some further funding when the initial contract ends. The TRA has, after all, been a useful pilot for BCC which is keen to develop this sort of partnership.

We suggest this not from any enthusiasm for these initiatives, which lead to libraries drifting away from the public sector, but to avoid the risk of imminent closure, in order to leave open the possibility of its return to the public sector at such time as one of Birmingham's priorities is again to have a fully publicly owned and publicly run library service . Closure here would also mean that there was only one library in the Erdington District - which would exacerbate what some users at the public meetings have seen as a north-south divide, with higher library provision in south Birmingham as against the north of the city.

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