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Libraries Services Consultation: Focus Groups

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Methodology

- **Researchers:** Strategic Research Team (SRT) researchers

- **Sample:** 45 Birmingham residents

- **Focus groups:** Six focus groups, with three focussing specifically on either Sutton Coldfield Library, Aston Library or impact on people with disabilities.

- **Analysis:** Qualitative data analysis

Sample demographics

The demographic breakdown of the sample are as follows:

- **Age:** 18-24yrs = 5; 25-34yrs = 6; 35-44yrs = 6; 45-54yrs = 7; 55-64yrs = 11; 65+yrs = 9; Prefer not to say = 1.

- **Disability:** Yes = 7; No = 37; Prefer not to say = 1.

- **Ethnicity:** White = 27; Asian/Asian British = 11; Black African/Caribbean/Black British = 6; Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups = 0; Other = 1.

- **Religion or belief:** Christian = 18; Hindu = 1; Jewish = 1; Muslim = 10; Sikh = 2; No religion or belief = 13

- **Sex:** Female = 26; Male = 18; Prefer not to say = 1.

- **Sexual Orientation:** Bisexual = 0; Gay or lesbian = 1; Heterosexual or straight = 14; Other = 1 Prefer not to say = 4; No data = 25.

Introduction to findings

- A short presentation (the same one presented at some of the public meetings) was given to the group prior to discussions to help inform the participants of the proposed changes.

- The focus group discussions explored themes such as current usage, impacts of proposed changes, views on the approach to proposals (e.g. approach and tiers and any ideas or suggestions to help achieve savings).

- Following this format, the analysis and reporting reflects key high level themes and appropriate sub-themes.

- Key findings and quotes are followed by the reference number for the focus groups that they were mentioned in (i.e. the number in the brackets).

- Key quotes have been used to illustrate the findings. These can be found in the notes section. Not all quotes have been used.

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Executive summary (1)

- Many spoke passionately about what the library means for them, their families and their community. Non-library users, while accepting they have other means of accessing services provided by libraries, still spoke of the importance of libraries for those that use and depend on them.

- Generally participants engaged well on many of the topics. Unsurprisingly, much of the feedback related to what services are used and are important, who might be impacted by the proposals and how and what areas they were unhappy about. Having said this, however, there were some ideas exchanged about helping to meet the savings challenge.

- While many seemed to understand the challenge facing the council, some believed that the situation has been exacerbated due to council finances being mismanaged and too much money was being spent on the Library of Birmingham at the expense of community libraries. In addition, there was also a perception that longer term risks and impacts were not being considered (e.g. having to make further cuts and closures in the future and impacts on individuals' health and wellbeing).

- There was a mixed response to the proposals and approach. Some thought it was comprehensive and well thought out, whilst others thought the approach was confusing or that decisions were made regardless of the results of the assessment and criteria. The concerns were equally mixed, ranging from consequences of closing libraries (i.e. Sutton and Aston) to proposals not being enough to make the savings.

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Executive summary (2)

- The library is perceived to be not just a source of information, but rather a place that enables learning, social interaction and inclusivity. Groups that use or rely on libraries services included:
  - people who may struggle to access computers, the internet, books or quiet space (e.g. individuals and families from deprived households),
  - those who might require support to use computers and access online services (e.g. older people and people with disabilities),
  - those who use libraries to socialise and meet new people (children and parents, older people, people with disabilities), and,
  - people who want or need to access books, information and learning sources (e.g. children, students, adults).
- Linked to this, many of the individuals and groups thought to likely be impacted by changes, reductions or cuts to library services include those mentioned above. Key impacts identified included reduction in the availability of places that provide a safe space to access information, study and socialise. Additional potential barriers identified included: additional travel expenses, greater inconvenience, further distance to travel to alternative libraries and fewer resources and staff to support those that need it.

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Executive summary (3)

- While some acknowledged that technology (e.g. self service machines and open access) could help alleviate some of the impacts, generally it was viewed very negatively and was not seen as a suitable solution (i.e. it would not replace service staff provide currently and it is not cost effective). There were concerns that this would particularly impact groups such as older people and people with disabilities. Participants found it particularly difficult to engage with the concept of open access, as they felt they needed more detailed information to understand how it works and what the cost and benefits are.

- There was a mixed response to opening hours being increased and reduced. A key concern relating to the reduction of hours was that it would further discourage people to use the library. Participants thought that current opening hours are not suitable for some residents (e.g. people who work full time) and that it would be beneficial if these reflected the demand.

- Views about mobile libraries were mixed. While some questioned the effectiveness and efficiency, others believed that it was a service that certain groups, such as older people, people with disabilities and those living in areas with poor transport links, depended on.

- The idea of using volunteers also had a mixed response. Some stated that if it helped keep the service running, it was a good idea to explore further and that there was an appetite amongst members of the community to take on such roles. Others were concerned that it was being used as a way of replacing skilled and experienced staff and that there would be risks such as lack of commitment and lack of skills that would impact the quality of service.

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Executive summary (4)

- As expected, views regarding the proposed closure of Aston library and Sutton Coldfield library were largely focussed on concerns. Key concerns included: that the communities will be losing a valued community asset, the proposed alternative provisions will not be suitable and will not be able to meet the demand and needs of users.
- Participants did spend some time thinking about what could be done to help meet the savings challenge. Suggestions included:
  - working in partnership with local organisations and possibly combining or co-locating appropriate services (e.g. citizen advice, benefit advice, job centre) in the same building so as to create a community hub of sorts,
  - generating income by charging a fee to use spare rooms and spaces, incorporating cafes or shops into the buildings, and,
  - charging users an annual library card membership fee (e.g. between £2.50 and £5.00) and reservation fee (e.g. 25-50p), although it was acknowledged that these would not be suitable for all users.
- Libraries services may find it useful to understand concerns and risks identified by participants, assess these risks and identify mitigations that would eradicate or minimise such risks. This may help avoid issues in the future and, if communicated effectively with users, help alleviate concerns and potentially improve the perception of the council.
- Suggestions made by the participants should also be explored for viability and results shared with users.

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Current users of library services

- Jobseekers
- Community
- Readers
- Children and families
- Researchers
- Students (young people and mature students)
- People with disabilities
- Mothers
- Adults
- Older people
- People looking for homes
- Local schools and play groups
- Young people
- Groups or individuals at risk of exclusion (e.g. older people, people with disabilities, people from deprived backgrounds)
- Organisations and groups such as charities and councillors
- Those without access to computers and/or internet

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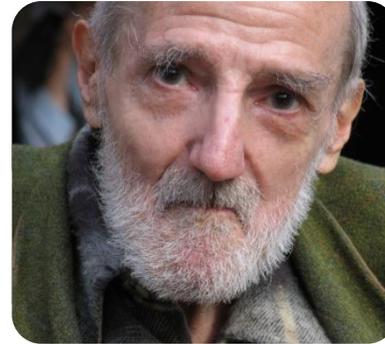
Library users and service used

- Many participants were library users and identified the following reasons for visiting the libraries:
  - borrowing books, (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
  - computers and internet access, (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
  - accessing information (e.g. jobs, tourist info, info for targeted groups such people with disabilities), (1, 2, 4, 5, 6)
  - social meeting place, (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)
  - organised activities (e.g. story time sessions for younger children), (1, 2, 3, 4, 6)
  - space to study, (1, 2, 3)
  - engaging with council (e.g. councillor sessions), (3)
  - hire rooms (e.g. for workshops with targeted groups such as people with disabilities), and, (5)
  - archives. (1)
- This suggests that the library is not just perceived as a source of information, but rather a place that enables learning, social interaction and inclusivity.

Views on community libraries

Many participants spoke of what community libraries mean to them. Key messages included:

- community libraries are a community asset/hub, (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
- they offer access to free or cheap resources for all of the community, (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
- they are seen as a place that encourages lifelong learning, beginning with children (e.g. access to children's books and story time sessions) but also providing a facility for information (e.g. access to computers, internet and archives) and study space for adults and older people, (1, 2, 4, 5, 6)
- community libraries allow an inclusive and safe place for people to visit. In addition, social meetings, organised sessions (e.g. outreach sessions, IT workshops, CV writing, story time sessions) and a quiet place to study and socialise are all thought to contribute to helping people become more independent or remain independent (e.g. children, people with disabilities and older people), and, (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
- many participants spoke about the need to improve services and/or increase the use of libraries (e.g. greater promotion of activities and facilities), despite acknowledging that there was a reduced budget. (1, 3, 4, 6)

Non-library users

- Few participants were currently non-library users. They identified the following reasons for not using the community libraries:
    - technology allows greater and more convenient access to some services (e.g. enable computer use at home, easy access to internet and ability to download books at home), (3, 6)
    - stopped going when the library was temporarily shut and have not got back into the habit of going, (3, 6)
    - prefer to buy books, (3)
    - don't have time to visit the library, and, (3)
    - appropriate academic books are not available in community libraries. (4)
- While some do not themselves use library services, it was generally accepted that these services were very important to those that do currently use them and generally seemed concerned about the impact it would have on groups and individuals that used and relied on the service. (3, 4, 6)

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Groups likely to be impacted
– as a result of proposed reduction or cuts in services

- Children (1, 2, 3, 4, 6)
- Older people (1, 2, 3, 4, 6)
- Job seekers (1, 2, 5)
- Transient community (1)
- Parents (1, 2, 4)
- People with disabilities (1, 5, 6)
- Children with additional support needs (1, 6)
- People from deprived households (1, 2, 3, 5)
- People who do not have sufficient access to IT and internet at home (1, 2, 4, 5)
- People who struggle with using IT and online services (5, 6)
- Community (including transient community) (1, 2, 3, 4)
- Students (including mature students) (1, 2, 3, 4)
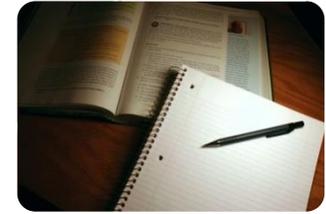
Potential impact of proposals
- reduction or cuts in services (1)

The following impacts were identified

- Reduction in places for people to use where people feel safe, which would likely affect:
  - children, (1, 2, 6)
  - women, and, (2)
  - parents and carers. (1, 2)
- Reduction in a public place where community gather and interact socially, which could affect:
  - general community, (1, 2)
  - children and families, (1, 3, 4, 6)
  - older people, and, (3)
  - people with disabilities. (5)
- Fewer reasons to leave the house for some individuals and groups, such as:
  - older people, (3)
  - people with disabilities, and, (5)
  - mothers and carers. (1)

Potential impact of proposals
- reduction or cuts in services (2)

- Additional travel and related costs to get to alternative library sites when the preferred community library is closed, particularly likely to impact:
  - older people, (1)
  - students, (1, 2)
  - those on low incomes, including those on benefits who are facing additional cuts to their income, and, (1, 2, 4, 5)
  - people experiencing mobility issues. (1)
- Some people would find it difficult to go to another library and so the likely outcome would be that they just not go. Specific groups that were identified included people with disabilities and older people, as they are less resilient to change and more likely to experience social exclusion (e.g. people with disabilities, older people and parents and carers). (1, 2, 3, 5)

Potential impact of proposals
- reduction or cuts in services (3)

- Make it more difficult for people to access computers, which could negatively affect:
  - o job seekers, who currently rely on library computers, to meet the requirements set out by the Job Centre (e.g. amount of time spent on job searches, or fill out job applications), (1, 2, 4, 5)
  - o people who do not have access to a computer or internet (e.g. people from low income backgrounds and older people), (2, 4, 6)
  - o students (including adult learners) and school children for studying, and, (1, 2)
  - o people who require additional support and are unfamiliar or learning how to use computers and access online services (e.g. older people and people with disabilities). (3, 4, 5)
- Cuts to staff were also thought to result in staff having less time to support people who require face to face service and support (e.g. older people and people with disabilities. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
- Reduced hours, facilities, staff and lack of promotion of activities could result in less use and provide a reason for the library to be closed in the future. (1, 3, 6)

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Self service facilities

Most groups discussed self service facilities. Key comments included:

- largely negative response to this (e.g. unreliable), (2, 3, 5, 6)
- should not be used to replace staff and/or staff will still need to be available, (2, 3, 5, 6)
- difficult to use, (5, 6)
- certain groups will be impacted most:
  - older people, (3, 6)
  - people with disabilities (e.g. those that use wheelchairs, have sight impairment, and have learning disabilities), (5, 6)
- concerns that it will be costly– up front cost and cost of maintenance, with particular concern about 'risky' and 'unreliable' technology, (4, 6)
- would discourage the use of libraries, (3, 5)
- questioned whether cost and benefits have been assessed and trialled, and, (6)
- those that made positive comments thought that younger people/students would use them but usually also stated that they would not be suitable for everybody and that staff would still be required. (3, 4, 6)

Open access

- Open access was discussed in some groups but the general view was that there was not enough information to fully understand the concept.
- Participants in three focus groups did not talk about open access. (1, 2, 3)
- In the focus groups that discussed open access, some participants stated that:
  - they were against this idea, (6)
  - they think it is a good idea (i.e. it could help extend opening hours), (5)
  - it could risk alienating certain groups who struggle with technology (e.g. older people), (4)
  - it would be a waste of resources, (6)
  - there was high risk of theft in certain areas, far too risky, and, (6)
  - they believed that it wouldn't help make the savings required (i.e. cost of security to ensure safety and building would still have running costs). (6)

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Mobile libraries (1)

All groups discussed mobile libraries. Key themes included:

- mixed views amongst different focus groups regarding mobile libraries:
  - some believed that they are not effective (e.g. they are too small or not cost effective), (1, 2, 3)
  - while others believe that they currently provide or could provide a service to specific groups or areas (e.g. older people and those that have difficulty travelling to a 'fixed' library, where there are limited transport options, where there are few library provisions in the area or where there are proposed closures such as Sutton Coldfield and Aston). (3, 5, 6)
- mixed views on whether there should be a change in service:
  - some stated that there should be no mobile service and invest that money in 'fixed' libraries or work with partners to provide transport to help people get to 'fixed' libraries, (3)
  - others thought a reduced service should be provided to only to those in greatest need, although it was acknowledged by some that this could have a negative impact on particular groups, such as older people, (3)
  - some believed an increased service (if the service is cost effective) and reduce opening hours of 'fixed' libraries further, (5)
  - some also questioned why there was a concentration of mobile libraries in certain areas (e.g. Ladywood) and suggested they be moved to areas with the greatest need. (6)

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Mobile libraries (2)

Other key points made about mobile libraries included:

- questioned how much the mobile library service is used and how much they cost, (3, 4, 5)
- needs to be a reliable and consistent service, and, (6)
- suggestion for mobile libraries to 'follow footfall' and go where people are to increase the use of the service (e.g. Grand Central). (4)

Volunteers

- The was a mixed response to the idea of using volunteers:
  - three groups generally agreed that volunteers could and/or should be used if it helped supplement or retain the level of services available, (2, 4, 5)
  - one group thought that volunteers should not be used, and, (1)
  - two groups had mixed views and thought that while all options should be explored, the council should be aware of risks associated with using volunteers (e.g. not being available when required and not having the required skills). (3, 6)
- Two groups spoke about there being an appetite amongst the community to volunteer to help existing staff keep the libraries running, and furthermore, stating that there might be benefits to the community, (e.g. gaining work experience). (2, 6)
- Key concerns about using volunteers included:
  - availability of volunteers, (1, 3)
  - commitment issues, (1)
  - not skilled enough, (1, 6)
  - devaluing experienced staff and librarians or that they will replace current staff, and, (1, 4)
  - getting enough support to undertake the job. (5)

Opening hours

- The increase in opening hours for some libraries, particularly Stirchley library was welcomed by some but others had concerns (i.e. additional pressure on staff). (6)

- Reducing hours could have negative impacts, such as becoming less convenient, more confusing and discourage people from using the library (e.g. not being open when they visit or changes difficult to cope with for people who suffer from anxiety and stress). (5)

- The importance of effectively promoting opening hours when they change was highlighted. Whilst this would be useful for all users, it would particularly benefit those that are dependent on services provided by the library. (5)

- There was a suggestion that libraries be open for fewer days and longer hours, as opposed to open on more days but with reduced hours. (5)

- It was noted that current opening hours are not suitable for some residents (e.g. people who work or are in full time education) and that it might be beneficial if opening hours reflected the demand. (2, 3, 4)

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Proposal to close Aston library and Sutton Coldfield (1)

There were some points that were made in both Aston and Sutton Coldfield focus groups about the proposal to close these libraries:

- both libraries were considered a key part of the community that generations have used and enjoyed, (1, 2)
- current provisions were perceived to be superior to alternative libraries, (1, 2, 4)
- there were concerns about capacity of the alternative libraries to meet the needs and demands of the community (e.g. access to computers, space, books, staff), (1, 2)
- both of the current locations were considered more convenient and more accessible than alternative libraries, (1, 2)
- the current locations are safer, and, (1, 2)
- skilled, knowledgeable and helpful staff, that meet the needs of users, were an essential part of the library experience. (1, 2)

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Proposal to close Aston library and Sutton Coldfield (2)

Key concerns raised in both the Aston and Sutton Coldfield focus groups included:

- a valued community asset will be lost, [1, 2]
- proposed alternative provisions are not going to be able to meet the demand and needs of their existing users and additional users of the libraries proposed to be closed, (e.g. access to computers, space, books, staff), [1, 2]
- location of proposed alternative libraries will not be convenient and will be less accessible, which is likely to impact particular groups and reduce library usage, [1, 2, 5]
- concerns about alternative libraries not being as safe (e.g. children have to travel further and cross more busy roads to get to Birchfield, easier for children to run out of the library at Mere Green, than it is at Sutton Coldfield), and, [1, 2]
- loss of skilled, experienced and helpful staff will have an impact on the library experience all service users, but particularly people with disabilities, older people and children. [1, 2]

Other concerns are similar to impacts identified generally by all of the focus groups. The key difference is that the perceived impact on the Aston and Sutton Coldfield community would be sharper and more permanent, due to the proposed closure of the libraries. See slides 15-17 for more details.

Proposal to close Aston library and Sutton Coldfield (3)

Aston Library:

- Aston is a deprived area and closing down the library will leave a 'hole' in the area, particularly as it is a deprived area. (2, 3)
- Aston has a high population of young people and they will be affected by the closure. (3)

Sutton Coldfield library:

- There was mistrust of the council amongst some participants and a perception that Sutton Coldfield is treated unfairly by the council because:
    - it was seen as an affluent area, and, (1)
    - largely differs in political view. (2)
- Sutton library should not be seen as a community library, but rather a central library for the town, and this is not suitably reflected in the criteria/assessment. (1)
- There were also concerns that once the Sutton library was closed, there would never be another library in the centre of Sutton again. (1)
- It is not just the residents that live in the two mile radius of the library that use it, there is a 'transient' community that uses it, (e.g. people that work in Sutton Coldfield, shoppers, people that travel into Sutton from other areas). (1)
- Many did not understand how the running costs were calculated and questioned why they were so high, despite the council owning the building. (1)

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Alternative proposals for Aston

- Many participants agreed that the council should try to find an alternative building for the Aston library service, which was close to the current location.

- There were a number of empty properties that were discussed as potential alternatives for locating the library, (e.g. old Albert Road library). But some participants understood that these buildings had been sold or are in the process of being sold, and so would not be viable options. (2)

- Participants also discussed the potential of local schools and nurseries incorporating the library in their building(s). Some participants, however, believed that schools would not have the space to accommodate this. (2)

- Another idea included the council bidding for the current building or negotiating with the current owners, as it was argued that there is a real need for this service. (2)

- Some participants felt that an alternative building would need to also accommodate the adult education centre as well, which is currently located in the same building as the library. (2)

Alternative proposals for Sutton Coldfield

- Participants were open to the idea of relocation, as long as it remained central to Sutton Coldfield, was a 'practical' alternative, was easily accessible and was more visible than the current library.

- Two alternative sites were discussed. The first was a suggestion by a participant to explore the viability of a former club in Sutton Coldfield city centre (i.e. Lower Parade, next to McDonalds) and the second was a reference to a former proposal of moving the library to the Town Hall (although it was not stated who proposed this). It was acknowledged, however, that these options would need a lot of refurbishment and this would require further investment, which was unlikely to happen. (1)

- Participants also suggested that if the shopping centre is to be closed, the council could include criteria which would stipulate that developers must include a library as part of the development. (1)

Perceptions of council approach and proposals (1)

Key themes identified relating to the council's approach and proposals included:

- Approach/criteria/tiers:
  - Sutton Coldfield library has been unfairly targeted and key aspects are not properly recognised in the criteria and assessment (see slide 27 for more details). (1, 2)
  - Perception that the north of Birmingham is affected more than the South. (2)
  - Tier 3 and/or 4 offer is not a sufficient offer. (1, 3, 6)
  - Mixed response to approach:
    - Some thought it was "well thought out" and "sensible", while, (3, 5)
    - Some stated "no thought" had gone into it and were sceptical about motives. (2, 6)
  - Consider using volunteers for libraries where hours are proposed to be reduced (see slide 22 for more details on participants' views regarding volunteers). (2, 4, 5)
- Some solutions suggested by the council are unsatisfactory (e.g. providing computers in a room and reducing hours and staff at busy libraries). (1, 6)

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Perceptions of council approach and proposals (2)

- Some participants were concerned that there will be more cuts in the future. (3, 6)
- Some were concerned lack of facilities will mean libraries will be used less and this be used as a rationale to close libraries in the future. (3)
- Comments related to working with partners included:
  - difficulty understanding what 'partnership working' meant, (1, 2)
  - questioned how proactive the council has been to explore this concept and find suitable partners, (1)
  - some suggestions made about which organisations' libraries services could partner up with or locate with, (1, 2, 4, 6)
  - some concerns about partnership working (e.g. lack of interest, issues relating to funding, lack of required commitment of organisations, lack of interest and risk of privatisation), (1, 2)
  - keen to help find interested partners, but need more information. (1)

Suggestions

Key suggestions identified by participants included:

- Encourage partnership working by extending or combining the library service to also offer other services (e.g. those that cater for health issues or languages, citizen advice, small enterprises or incorporate a cafe). This may enable it to become part of a community hub as opposed to just a library service and make achieve efficiencies. (1, 2, 3, 4, 6)
- Charging for services (e.g. library card membership fee, reservation fee, hire out rooms for a fee), although it was acknowledged that this may not be suitable for all residents and organisations. (1, 3, 5, 6)
- Identifying and accessing grants (e.g. health grants) (3)
- Utilisation of services that could help get residents with additional support needs to libraries. (5)
- Selling refreshments and other items. (2, 4)
- Understanding risks, particularly in the long term. (4, 6)
- Some thought having fewer libraries that are fully resourced and open for longer would be better a option than more libraries open with reduced hours, facilities and staff. However, others disagreed with this approach and preferred bolstering the service by combining or bringing together other services that would service community needs. (4)
- Use data to target and improve services. (3)
- Outreach for those that are housebound. (4, 6)

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Key considerations (1)

- Understand and assess the risks and impacts (including in the long term) to specific groups, particularly older people, people with disabilities, children and families and people from deprived households. Key questions that could be explored include: What are the alternatives? What can be done to mitigate or minimise this risk? How can we enable increased resilience?

- Can future communication or engagement information be made more user friendly? It may be worth exploring how different groups like to be communicated with and what sort of information they would find most useful.

- Concerns regarding the implementation of IT solutions to save money could be explored further, risks assessed, cost benefit analysis conducted and if possible, benefits relayed back to residents. User feedback may also be valuable, however, it is important that users fully understand the solutions prior to seeking their views.

- Can current data be used to enable a more targeted service that meets the demands of current users and potential future users? Is more data required and can this be collected/acquired?

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Key considerations (2)

- It may be worth assessing the provision of mobile libraries to understand whether it is cost effective and adequately meets the needs of users that are likely to requires the services. Again, relevant data may help with this assessment.
- When exploring the idea of using volunteers, ensure that risks associated with this are assessed and mitigated/minimised to avoid issues in the future. It may also be helpful to understand the limitations of volunteers, if they are to be used to supplement services that have seen a reduction in staff.
- It may be useful to understand and address concerns of the users of Aston library and Sutton Coldfield library. Further discussions or communications may be required to find solutions or alleviate concerns.
- Explore further the suggestions (e.g. for more efficient provision of services, such as combining key services), and test for viability. It may also be useful to share any feedback with users to demonstrate that they were listened to and their ideas were explored.

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- Self service loan: UTS library, https://www.flickr.com/photos/utslibrary/4791886971
- Security camera: Mike Mozart, https://www.flickr.com/photos/jeepersmedia/13046700524
- Money and calculator: Images Money https://www.flickr.com/photos/59937401@N07/5474761220
- DSC_3054: Jim Maloney, https://www.flickr.com/photos/arkoptrix/8688682425
- Help wanted?: Paul Townsend, https://www.flickr.com/photos/brizzlebornandbred/6136653327

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