CROYDON

Library service review
Phase 3 report

Croydon Council and Activist Group

v0.9 August 2024

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This report was jointly produced by Croydon Council and Activist Group.

Report details

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Contents

1. Introduction

Purpose of and background to the report

1.1   This report sets out the findings following the latest round of public consultation during Phase 3 of Croydon Council's Library Service Review, with a set of key findings, conclusions and recommendations to be considered. This report covers Phase 3 of the project (July 2023 to June 2024), building on the research findings from Phases 1-2 of the project (July to October 2023).

1.2   Across the country, library services have in recent years been the subject of reviews, rationalisation and cost-cutting following a reduction in the spending power of local government. This has been accompanied by a steady reduction in the usage of libraries.

1.3   Croydon Council has been facing its own significant financial challenges and in 2022 introduced changes that reduced the cost of the library service by £500k. During the review it became apparent that investment was needed, the Council made clear that no further savings would be sought from the library service's budget and that reductions in operating costs made by the review could be reinvested in the service.

1.4   The Council launched the latest review of its library service in July 2023 following the changes to the model implemented in April 2022. The Library Service Review was tasked to explore and discuss a number of key areas, including:

- The emerging needs of Croydon residents post-Covid, building on the work of previous consultations.

- The future options for library service delivery that are sustainable long-term and will align with other transformational work underway.

- The current library service offer, including opening hour options and weekend opening potential.

- The physical estate, including the current costs/benefits per site, the benefits of targeted capital investment in physical fabric improvements, and the quantity of buildings in comparison to other Councils.

- Opportunities for more community managed buildings and/or colocation working with local partners.

- Opportunities for working more closely and efficiently with local partners to achieve common local goals.

- Opportunities for greater technology use and technology enabled access, including the potential for offering longer opening hours for residents.

- How a more resilient and locally tailored service offer could be delivered from a different physical and financial asset base, including the assignment of staff to particular sites and new income generation ideas.

1.5　In the first two phases of this review, an analysis of need and review of options for change was undertaken and the resulting reports were brought to Cabinet on 31st January 2024. The reports included proposals to improve the service and ensure that the Council meets its statutory obligations to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service for people who live, work or study in Croydon.

1.6　The model proposed to Cabinet set out to demonstrate how service budgets could be used more effectively by reducing the number of libraries, extending opening hours and investing in the remaining sites and offering outreach for people who aren't currently using the service.

1.7　At the meeting on 31st January 2024, Cabinet endorsed the recommendations for the library service to commence public consultation on the proposed model. A period of ten weeks of consultation (Thursday 8th February 2024 to Friday 19th April 2024) was undertaken (as described later in this section) reaching out across the whole borough.

1.8　The review has been conducted in five phases (see table below):

Table A1.1: summary of Phases 1-4 and indicative timescales by month.

Phase	Summary of purpose and outcomes
Phase 1: Discovery (July to October 2023)	• Asking managers and staff to contribute their thoughts and ideas to help the Council continue to deliver the best services possible within the money it has available. • Talking to local politicians, senior leaders and key partners to help us explore their ambitions for these vital public services, as well as understand what has worked well (and less well) in the past.
Phase 2: Option development (September to October 2023)	• Undertaking a 'needs and asset analysis' to assess how well the library service was now performing. • Taking the ideas suggested to us so far to help the Council develop a set of possible future options for the services. • Preparing these future options ready for public consultation.

Phase	Summary of purpose and outcomes
Phase 3: Public consultation (February to April 2024)	• Speaking with Croydon's residents, politicians, senior leaders and key partners to seek their feedback on proposals and understand the potential impact of the proposed changes.
Phase 4: review and analysis (May to September 2024)	• Analyse feedback from consultation. • Review implications of feedback for the proposals. • Develop final recommendations following consultation.
Phase 5: Implementation (October 2024 onwards)	• Informed by the feedback from consultation, Croydon's political leaders will be taking a decision on their preferred option(s). • Beginning to implement any changes to the service from October 2024 onwards. • Continuing to keep Croydon's residents informed on any changes to services, with the intention of reflecting on the impact of these changes, again in discussion with Croydon residents, within the next 12-24 months.

Our approach and scope

1.9 The Council commissioned Activist Group, specialists in engagement, research and advice on library services, to provide independent support working in collaboration with the Council's project team.

1.10 This support covered the engagement and primary research elements for Phases 1-3 of the project, exploring and analysing the views, ideas and aspirations of the people and organisations who live, work and study in Croydon. This included identifying a wide range of perspectives of the Council's library offer, its ambitions, and people's ideas for the future, which are summarised in this report.

1.11 Activist also worked with the Council's project team to develop a needs analysis and evaluation framework for assessing the impact of the current library service model and opportunities and options for improvement. Libraries Connected's 'Universal Library Offers' (as summarised in section 2 below) were used to help assess the library service and identify opportunities for improvement.

1.12 **A set of 'strategic outcomes' for the library review were developed and these were used to assess the opportunities and recommend options for improvement.**

How we've gone about engaging with stakeholders

1.13   In Phases 1-2, and as summarised in the January 2024 Cabinet report, we used four main methods for gathering people's views and other relevant data:

- **Interviews** with key Council senior officers and service leads.

- **External briefings** with Friends Groups, community groups and members of the public.

- **Desktop review of previous consultation findings and feedback,** where members of the public were consulted on previous service options, ideas and proposals.

- **Staff 'idea generation' workshops** with a cross-section of library service staff.

- **Desktop analysis of performance data, other local data, benchmarking data and wider ideas from elsewhere about what works.**

1.14   In Phase 3, as summarised in this report, we used ten main methods for gathering people's views and other relevant data:

- **An initial online briefing** to launch the consultation, hosted by Cllr Stranack, to present the proposals.

- **Structured public meetings** held near or at the four Croydon libraries proposed for closure; open to all, hosted by Members/Officers.

- **Informal public drop-in sessions** offering opportunities for more informal unstructured conversation; held at all Croydon library sites or nearby buildings; open to all, hosted by Members/Officers.

- **Workshops – internal**, in the form of small group briefings with key Council staff, including Union and volunteer representatives.

- **Workshops – external** with key Council partners, community groups, Friends groups and representative groups from the Croydon community; hosted and facilitated by Council officers with preparatory support from Activist.

- **Briefings – internal**, in the form of small group briefings with key Council staff, including Union and volunteer representatives.

- **Briefings – external** with external Council and library partners, local community representatives and members of the public.

- **Community events – local engagement**, featuring attendance by key Council officers at pre-arranged community events, or outreach opportunities, across a number of external locations across Croydon. These included engagement with

children and young people via Holidays and Food (HAF) camps, school sessions and youth bus, and on-street outreach.

- **Six petitions** were submitted by the date of the closure of formal consultation, coordinated by local community groups, sharing their views on the proposals. Additionally, a seventh petition from users of Shirley library was submitted after the closure of the consultation, which has also been taken into account.

- **Consultation emails** submitted by members of the public and other interested parties to the Croydon Council consultation email address setup specifically for receiving feedback or asking questions about the consultation and proposals.

- **A public survey**, designed by Activist and Croydon's project team, hosted by on the Council's consultation platform, Get Involved. The public were invited to share their thoughts on the proposals (see Annex ii, Appendix B for the survey questionnaire). The survey was designed to take no more than 15 minutes and was widely publicised via the Council's communication channels and in each library. The survey was launched on Thursday 8th February 2024 and closed on Friday 19th April 2024. Paper copies of the survey were also available.

1.15 **The results of this extensive consultation have been summarised in this report (and supporting appendices). We have then gone on use the feedback from consultation to review the changes proposed in the January 2024 Cabinet report and make final recommendations for change.**

How to read the rest of this report

1.16 The chapters of this report and its appendices are grouped together as follows:

- *Chapter 1 explains the purpose and background to the report, outlining our approach to consultation and a summary of each chapter in this document.*

- *Chapter 2 summarises the proposals and their rationale, providing an overview of Croydon's library service, the previous engagement findings prior to the Phase 3 consultation including the impact of past changes, the future options for improving the service, the next steps and consideration of the financial challenges facing the Council and the public sector more broadly.*

- *Chapter 3 describes the headlines from our Phase 3 consultation findings, including our methodology, the feedback on the service, the changes made and a set of key issues to be considered from the consultation with conclusions.*

- *Chapter 4 assesses the options and issues that have arisen from consultation, summarising the principal issues and criticism, the alternative options and proposals to be considered, a critique of the proposals and a summary of future recommendations for consideration.*

- *Chapter 5 sets out the final recommended new model and vision for the service, informed by the consultation findings and our analysis, including a summary of*

the key changes made as a result of consultation, and a set of future recommendations.

- *Chapter 6 explains the new operating and financial models that will be needed to support the recommended new model.*

- *Chapter 7 presents a suggested implementation plan, with a work programme and description of the resources and governance arrangements required, to implement the recommended new model.*

- *Chapter 8 summarises our conclusions and recommendations.*

- *The Appendices to the report contain supporting documents and data from our Phase 3 engagement and research referred to within this report.*

2. Summary of the original proposals and their rationale

Introduction

2.1 **Croydon Council has been facing significant financial challenges and is seeking improvements in the efficiency of its library service while ensuring its long-term sustainability.**

2.2 **The Council launched a Library Service Review in 2023 to understand the impact of the changes made to the service in 2022 following two rounds of consultation.**

2.3 The review was based on a needs analysis and evaluation framework for assessing the impact of the current library service model and opportunities and options for improvement. **The Council wanted to work closely with Croydon residents and partners to identify a set of future options for the services that could deliver an efficient and effective service within the resources available**.

2.4 **The review started in July 2023 and the results of phases 1 and 2 were reported to the Council's Cabinet in January 2024 which decided to begin consultation on a set of proposals before final decisions are made on any changes to the service.**

A brief overview of the library service

2.5 **Croydon's library service is currently delivered over 13 buildings grouped into three areas: North, Central and South**. The service also delivers a home library service and supports delivery of library services at Upper Norwood Library Hub, situated in Lambeth but jointly owned by Croydon and Lambeth and operated by Lambeth Council and the Upper Norwood Library Trust.

2.6 The library service's annual budget is currently £2.8 million (with approximately £2m of the budget taken up by staff costs and the remainder allocated for buildings, digital infrastructure, soft facilities, transport and materials). The service operates with 45 full-time equivalent (fte) staff.

2.7 **Croydon Council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museum Act (PLMA, 1964) to "provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof".** The Council also has a duty to develop its library services in consultation with local residents and undertake statutory consultation on any significant service changes.

2.8 **In 2021, the Council consulted the public on ways of saving £500k from the library service budget to help address the Council's financial position.** Feedback from the first two rounds of consultation rejected options such as closures, outsourcing, community management and favoured the option of reducing opening hours by 21%.

2.9 **The Council decided to progress the reduction in staffed opening hours which were to be mitigated by introducing self-service opening ('Open+') with no library staff present and by other measures such as recruiting more volunteers.**

2.10 **These changes began to be implemented in 2022. The reduction in overall opening hours was much greater because Open+ and volunteering proved more difficult and slower. Public feedback about the changes has been negative.**

The role of the library service

2.11 **While books and other reading materials remain central to Croydon's statutory library service, the service plays a much wider part in the life of the people who live, work and study in the borough.** To reflect this, it uses the Libraries Connected 'Universal Library Offers' as a framework for developing and delivering a comprehensive public library service:

- Reading.

- Information and Digital.

- Culture and creativity.

- Health and wellbeing.

2.12 These are supplemented by three other offers:

- Employment and learning.

- Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise.

- Children's Promise.

2.13 **The performance of the library service in delivering these universal offers has been reviewed, taking into account the changes in the ethnically diverse borough and the severe deprivation facing parts of the population. These challenges include:**

- **Income deprivation affecting children** leading to poorer levels of literacy and educational attainment.

- **Health inequalities and mental health challenges** associated with isolation.

- **Digital exclusion**, particularly affecting the most deprived for whom many companies and public services now operate as 'digital by default'.

- **Exclusion from arts and culture** among many children and young people who first encounter culture and creativity in a library setting.

- Lower incomes in the borough compared with other London boroughs, particularly in the north of the borough leading to **a need for help with job search and study**.

- **Additional language needs** in some communities.

Engagement findings from Phases 1-2

2.14 Engagement in the first two phases of this project were limited to briefings with a number of interested groups who had been active in the previous consultation and to discussions with Council officers and library staff.

2.15 **At the external briefings, people expressed unhappiness and frustration at the impact of moving to part-time opening, seen by some as 'disastrous'.** It was reported that it had particularly affected parents, children and older people and was impacting on people who are struggling. Poor communication was cited and as well as the challenges faced by staff.

2.16 **Library staff reported a set of challenges faced with the new opening hours and the pressure it placed on them which was affecting their ability to provide the quality of service they wanted for their users.** They also reported problems with technology and the physical fabric of some buildings. They came up with a range of ideas for change to help make the service a good one.

2.17 **Across the discussions held, there was a strong consensus that the changes made in 2022 were not working.**

The impact of the changes made in 2022

2.18 **On one measure (the issue of all books and other materials) the service had improved slightly since before the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours, albeit against a low base of usage pre-pandemic and when benchmarked against neighbours**. That increase had been driven by a greater take-up of digital books and materials to the point where they represented nearly a third of all issues. Digital issues do not, of course, depend on the opening hours of libraries.

2.19 **For all the library service's other functions which did rely on library opening hours, the combined effect of the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours had been devastating.** Visits had more than halved, 'active usage'[1] had nearly halved and PC usage and attendances at events had also more than halved.

2.20 **At this point, the individual impacts of the pandemic and of the reduction in opening hours were not known.** It was felt that once the latest comparative performance data was published by CIPFA in December 2023, it would be possible to see the rate at which the performance of other authorities had recovered since the

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[1] 'Active usage' is a count of the number of users who had used services requiring a library card (ie borrowing and IT usage) once or more over the preceding 12 months.

pandemic. This would then allow the Council to judge better the particular impact of the reduction in opening hours and inform any future proposals for service changes.

2.21   In advance of any further consultation and analysis, it was believed that the changes would have had a serious adverse effect on many people's ability to take part in the digital world; on their health and wellbeing; on their participation in cultural life; and on their participation in the labour market. It was also thought to have potentially weakened people's sense of community.

2.22   Even more seriously, **it was identified that the reduction in opening hours and stretched staff capacity had hampered the ability of the library service to reach the people and communities who needed it most and the future generations for whom a thriving library service could offer a passport to a better life.**

2.23   **In summary, through no fault of the skilled and committed library staff or of the users who are loyal and passionate about its value, the library service was now failing.**

Options for improving the service

2.24   Based on the findings of the project and the feedback received to date, the report to the Cabinet in January 2024 argued that radical change was required. It was proposed that the success of the review should be judged against a draft set of strategic outcomes shown below.

Table A2.1: draft strategic outcomes for the review of library services

By three years' time, we will be able to say that the library review has achieved the following:	
Primary outcome	**Supporting outcomes**
1. We are reaching more people.	• More people are using our library service. • We reach the people who need us most in Croydon. • People know what we're offering.
2. We have improved our service to the whole community.	• We have a wide range of popular services and activities. • People across our communities enjoy what's available. • Our facilities are welcoming and attractive.
3. Our service is more efficient.	• We are delivering better value within the resources we have. • We generate more income from events and venue hire. • More people are willing to help.

2.25   A set of options were developed designed to achieve those outcomes, based on closing four poorer performing and less viable library buildings in order to free up resource to reinvest in the rest of the service.

2.26   Most of the options were recommended for further work and as the basis for consultation.

Table A2.2: options for improving the library service

Outcome	Options recommended for further work and consultation
1. We are reaching more people.	• Extend evening/weekend opening. • Review impact of Open+ in advance of further extension. • Move some libraries to better locations as opportunities arise. • Introduce 'library link' service points. • Introduce programme of outreach and marketing.
2. We have improved our service to the whole community.	• Extend programme of improved events, working with partners. • Increase community language provision. • Improve signage, entrances and interiors. • Improve libraries' IT offer. • Promote the library service's digital offer. • Train staff for more interactive role.
3. Our service is more efficient.	• Co-locate libraries and other services and closer collaboration with CALAT. • Increase IT and checkout self-service. • Continue in-house management of the service and explore community management of libraries at risk of closure. • Invest in increasing the number and scope of volunteers. • Introduce income generation. • Invest in energy efficiency.

Improving nine libraries by closing four

2.27 To free up resources for re-investing in the wider library service to deliver those options, all thirteen libraries were reviewed. Nine libraries were recommended to be retained, with proposals for each library to be improved, often working in partnership with other services and community organisations.

Table A2.3: libraries to be retained

Library	Main changes proposed to the library
Ashburton	• Upgrade the interior design of the library.
Central	• Look for an alternative location in a more suitable building at the heart of the changing shopping district.
Coulsdon	• Explore the remodelling of the library. • Invest in refurbishing the library's interior.
New Addington	• Research the barriers to library use in New Addington and introduce active outreach.
Norbury	• Review the operating model for the building including sharing or tenancy to generate income and footfall.

Purley	• Seek a better location and building for Purley Library.
Selsdon	• Introduce improved signage and market its presence.
South Norwood	• Explore opportunities to develop plans for an improved community facility jointly with the Samuel Coleridge Taylor youth centre.
Thorton Heath	• Invest in minor refurbishment.

2.28 Four libraries were recommended to be considered for closure, subject to detailed consultation and further research and analysis and the development of mitigations of the impact of the changes.

2.29 An initial equalities impact analysis was undertaken, with a need for further refinement following consultation, with a particular focus on the areas and demographics affected by the proposed changes. The impacts on people in need and on protected characteristics were highlighted as requiring careful attention.

Table A2.4: recommendations for libraries to be considered for closure

Library	Recommendations
Bradmore Green	• Consider targeted outreach work on the Tollers Estate. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.
Broad Green	• Research the barriers to library use in local areas of high deprivation for active outreach. • Assess the impact on the different ethnic groups in the catchment area and of the wider equalities impact. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.
Sanderstead	• Explore the level of community interest in retaining the building. • Explore the particular impacts on people with mobility issues that might prevent them making use of another library. • Explore options for Library Link provision to serve the community impacted by closure.
Shirley	• Consult Bromley Council over potential arrangements for Croydon residents to use West Wickham Library. • Explore the particular needs of residents in the most deprived LSOAs. • Explore potential mitigations for the older community in the catchment area. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.

2.30 **It was anticipated that money saved by closing some libraries would be redirected to fund proposed improvements to other libraries and so transform the ability of the service to encourage more people to use the service, especially those that needed it most.**

Consulting on the proposals (February to April 24)

2.31 **The previous two rounds of consultation demonstrated strong opposition to library closures with the libraries proposed for closure in 2021 receiving strong local support**. Given the strength of feedback against closures in previous rounds of consultation, further consultation was particularly important if this option was to be re-opened.

2.32 **Consultation with the public and voluntary and public sector organisations across the borough took place from Thursday 8th February to Friday 19th April 2024 (with an online webinar held to present the proposals on the evening of Wednesday 7th February)**. The process of consultation was designed to help inform and shape the proposals for the future library service with the help and insights of the public, staff and partner organisations. The findings from the latest round of consultation are summarised in Section 3 of this report and reviewed in more detail in Appendix B.

2.33 The Council can now consider the feedback from consultation before taking a decision about the next steps for the library service. Any decision will need to be taken in the strategic context of the Council's financial position and the future vision for the Council to operate in a financially sustainable and efficient way.

Financial developments since January 2024

Financial challenges and prospects

2.34 The report on phases 1 and 2 of the Library Review was presented to the Cabinet in January 2024. Since then, there have been two events that bear on the Council's budgets and its future spending power. First, the Council in February 2024 set a budget for 2024/25 in line with a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2024-28. Second, there has been a General Election and a new Government has taken office following a campaign in which the two main parties' public spending assumptions were subjected to scrutiny by independent commentators.

2.35 The Council agreed in February 2024 an increase in Council Tax of 2.99% for the financial year 2024-25, together with a 2% increase in the adult social care precept, in line with the cap that the government has set for all London boroughs.

2.36 This followed a decision in 2023 (with DLUHC's permission) for a council tax rise of 14.99% in 2023/24 without the need to hold a referendum (the national limit for council tax increases in unitary authorities without a referendum was 4.99%), with the extra 10% increase generating £21m additional income in 2023/24 and ongoing income in subsequent years as part of a wider programme of measures agreed with DLUHC to address the impact of historic problems in financial management. This included, on the advice of the government appointed Improvement and Assurance Panel, the setting of a £10m revenue budget in 2023/24 (reducing to £5m from 2024/25) to ensure the pace of change in the authority to deliver financial stability could be sustained. It also allowed the Council to limit savings in 2023/24 to £36m which was considered the maximum deliverable whilst protecting essential services.

2.37   Despite these increases in council tax and the savings delivered, the Council's financial position remains challenging. The losses resulting from poor commercial investments have left the Council with a substantial debt burden of £1.4bn. The annual cost of servicing that debt is £62m a year and, as a result, the Council has sought the Government's approval for 'capitalisation directions', ie permission to fund current *revenue* deficits from *capital* resources. Those capital resources could either take the form of asset sales or further borrowing.

2.38   **Even with these measures, the Council has to make substantial savings to if it is to achieve a balanced budget.** The Council budget for 2024/25 included revenue savings of £23.7m on top of savings from the Council's asset disposal programme. Over the period of the MTFP 2025-28, the Council must make further revenue budget savings of £20.0m in each year from 2025/26, split between savings already identified as part of the 2024/25 budget process (£7.0m for 2025/26 and £5.0m for 2026/27) and those still to be identified (£13.0m in 2025/26, £15.0m in 2026/27 and £20.0m in 2027/28). The largest area of savings identified so far is to come from Transformation of Adult Social Care, with savings of £13.0m over three years (£5.0m included for 2024/25 and a further £4.0m in both 2025/26 and 2026/27). Other savings include £3.6m over three years (£2.0m in 2024/25, £0.6m in 2025/26 and £1.0m in 2026/27) from bearing down on the cost of temporary accommodation, £3.0m (all in 2024/25) from children's services, mainly from reducing costs of children's placements and external funding for family hubs, £2.1m over two years (£1.8m in 2024/25 and £0.3m in 2025/26) from the sustainable communities service, including a significant increase in income from changes to parking policy, and £1.5m in 2024/25 from changes to customer access arrangements.

2.39   **The Council's expenditure on libraries per 1000 population is already one of the lowest in London (see section below) and no further savings are planned from the budget for the library service. However, there is little prospect of growth in the library service's budget since this would require savings from elsewhere in the Council.** The bulk of the Council's spending is on other statutory services, such as children's and adult social care services which face considerable spending pressure and, although it is a relatively small budget, there has also been significant pressure on the temporary accommodation budget. All are under pressure to reduce spending, as noted above.

2.40   Looking at the national context, there are a number of uncertainties. The biggest risk for the council in this respect is changes to the local government finance system. A rebasing of the way in which business rates are redistributed between councils together with an updated assessment of local authority need to spend has been planned for several years but has been postponed on several occasions. The Fair Funding Review mooted by the previous Government raised a possibility that resources could be moved away from London. These risks have already been considered by the Council in its MFTP.

2.41   It is also not yet clear how the new Government plans to deal with the funding pressures on local government. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) in March 2024, commenting on the previous Government's forecasts in their Budget, reported

that it implied an average 1% per annum increase in real terms in departmental revenue budgets from 2025/26 to 2028/29. However, the OBR calculated that spending by 'unprotected departments' (such as local government) would have to fall by 2.3% per annum in real terms, although this would be offset in the case of local councils by access to increases in council tax and business rate income (see section 4 for more details).

2.42   During the July 2024 General Election campaign, the Labour Party manifesto included as its 'first step' in government its intention to 'deliver economic stability with tough spending rules' and appeared to accept the previous Government's public spending assumptions except in some very specific areas such as raising VAT on private school fees to pay for additional teachers in the state system. Following the work the new Chancellor of the Exchequer asked Treasury officials to carry out on the state of public finances that the new government inherited, she announced to the House of Commons on 29th July 2024 that further immediate savings measures would be required, including targeting Winter Fuel Payments at recipients of Pension Credit and other means tested benefits and not proceeding with the previously delayed adult social care charging reforms.

2.43   More information should be available on funding prospects for 2025/26 when the Chancellor makes her first Budget announcement on 30th October 2024.

2.44   **However, there is no indication yet that improving the spending power of local government will be treated as a priority.**

Developments in the Council's wider plans

2.45   In March 2024, the Council adopted Future Croydon, the Council's transformation plan for 2024-2029. The plan sets out to deliver a 'radical redesign of the council' and includes programmes of change that are relevant to the review of library services.

2.46   The review of the Council's libraries will contribute to the 'asset transformation' programme and the 'customer first' programme by ensuring that the libraries support community development in the right settings. The review will also support the 'target operating model and council vision' programme, by exploring opportunities for rationalisation, automation and a more commercial approach. The review can also support wider regeneration and the 'Croydon Town Centre' programme, by identifying the contribution of the Central Library to the vibrancy of the town centre.

2.47   Future Croydon also includes a series of aims that are designed to:

- Provide services in an accessible way with excellent customer care.

- Empower residents and communities to help themselves and their neighbours.

- Restore Croydon's place as an important economic hub in south London.

- Unlock the aspiration and enterprise of our young people.

- Regenerate the town centre.

2.48   In February 2020, the Mayor of London awarded Croydon the status as 'London Borough of Culture' which included £4.4m funding to help stimulate a year of cultural celebration in the borough. This included £1.51m from the Mayor of London, £474k from National Lottery Heritage Fund and £150k from Arts Council England. No core Council funds were used for the programme.

2.49   A borough-wide, year-long programme of festivals, events and cultural activities was launched in 2023 and concluded in 2024.

2.50   The 'This is Croydon' programme's achievements for the London Borough of Culture included total audiences of 655,000; 92% of schools participating; over 5 million public art views; and new events and programming in the borough's libraries. The legacy of the programme, learning from what went well and not so well includes:

- Developing pride in Croydon.

- Surfacing hidden histories and celebrating seldom sess communities.

- Making sure everyone is welcome.

- Bringing a positive impact on health and wellbeing.

- Investing in the creativity of young people.

- Supporting skills and economic development.

2.51   We will examine the extent to which the review of the libraries service can support Future Croydon and the legacy from the Borough of Culture in section 4 of the report.

Developments in the performance of the libraries service

2.52 The report to Cabinet in January 2024 included performance data on the library service for the period up to the end of second quarter (up to the end of September 2023). The performance data for the whole of 2023/24 is now available which allows us to review the continuing progress made in increasing usage since the COVID lockdowns and the cut in opening hours made in 2022.

2.53 **Impressively, the upward trend in the issues of physical and digital books and other materials continued in 2023-24**, with the total number of issues rising by 15% from 662,825 in 2019-20 to 767,860 in 2023-24.

Figure A2.1: total loans (physical and digital) since 2019-20[2]
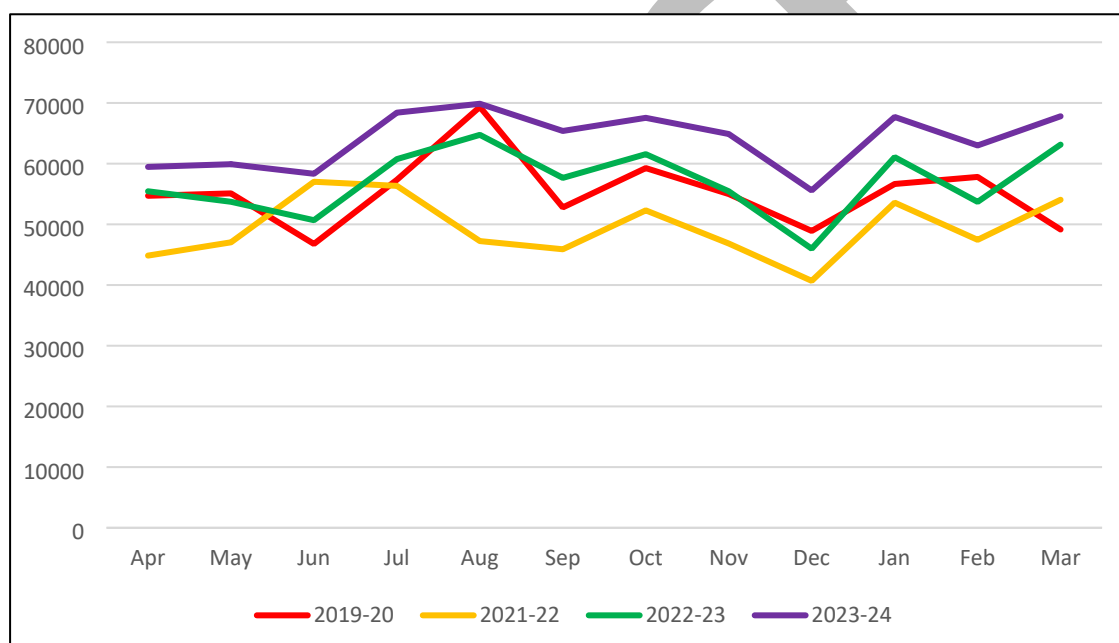
2.54 **This improvement is largely due to the rapid increase in the number of digital issues** which rose by 207% from 77,229 in 2019-20 to 237,257 in 2023-24. The number of physical issues has recovered to 91% of pre-pandemic levels, reaching 530,603 in 2023-24 compared with 585,596 in 2019-20.

2.55 Footfall has improved from 574,842 in 2022-23 to 683,224 in 2023-24**. However, footfall for 2023-24 still represents only 47% of pre-pandemic figures** of 1,466,960 in 2019-20. The average number of active users[3] has also risen from 33,764 in 2022-23 to 37,847 in 2023-24. The latter figure is still only 60% of the pre-pandemic figure 62,632 in 2019-20. As the chart below illustrates, the number of

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[2] Compared with previous March figures, the number of physical loans fell in March 2020 by approximately 20,000 due to the COVID lockdown, partially offset that month by a near doubling in digital loans to approximately 15,000.
[3] The term 'active user' refers to any library member using their library card to borrow books or other materials or use IT equipment in a library **once or more in the preceding 12 months**.

active users appears to have stabilised following the improvement in 2022-23, but remains well below pre-pandemic levels.

2.56 **The year-end figures demonstrate that it is still the case that fewer than one in ten of the borough's population have been active users of the library service, ie using their library card to order or renew books or other materials or using a PC once or more in the preceding 12 months.**

Figure A2.2: active users in 2019-20[4] compared with following years[5]
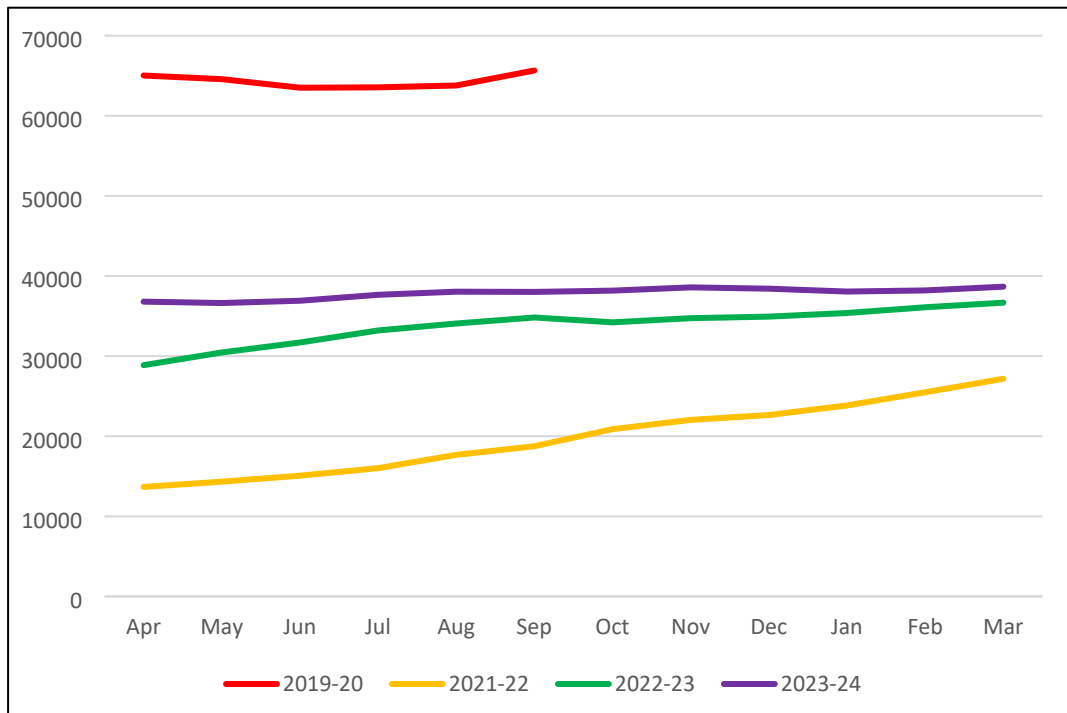
2.57 **Despite the reduction in opening hours, the number of loans of physical and digital books and other materials has increased since before the pandemic, driven by the increase in digital issues**. It is notable that **even physical issues (which can only be accessed when the library is open) have recovered nearly to the level in 2019-20, ie before the reduction in opening hours.**

2.58 **Visits to libraries and active usage (particularly PC usage) remain much below the levels of use before the reduction in opening hours**. It appears that borrowers of physical items have adapted their usage to the new, much reduced opening hours. Usage that is affected more by opening hours, eg casual visits or visits to use PCs appear to have been more affected by the reduction in opening hours.

2.59 **Another example is attendance at events**: with fewer hours in which to lay on events, the number of events in 2023-24 has more than halved compared with 2019-

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[4] The data for active users in 2019-20 only includes the first six months as data is not available for the period in the second half of the year due to the migration to a new library management system.
[5] Excludes the year 2020-21 which was most affected by COVID restrictions.

20 (down from 6,261 in 2019-20 to 2,962 in 2023-24) and **the number of attendees has also nearly halved** (down from 73,965 in 2019-20 to 38,046 in 2023-24).

Benchmarking data for 2022-23

2.60   Since the January 2024 Cabinet report was drafted, CIPFA have published the results of their annual library survey. This survey covers the period 2022/23, so does not reflect any changes in 2023-24. It does, however, illustrate the impact of the move to part-time opening in Croydon in 2022.

2.61   For a range of factors, including spend on libraries per head of population, visits and physical loans, Croydon was at or near the bottom of the 'league table' of those participating.

2.62   The participating authorities suffered a severe reduction in usage during the COVID pandemic on all indicators except digital book issues. With the pandemic restrictions removed, they had by 2022-23 recovered much of the ground lost during the pandemic – and at a faster rate than Croydon – as shown in the graph of trends in visitor numbers below.

Figure A2.3: trends in visitor numbers to libraries in London boroughs[6] 2018-23
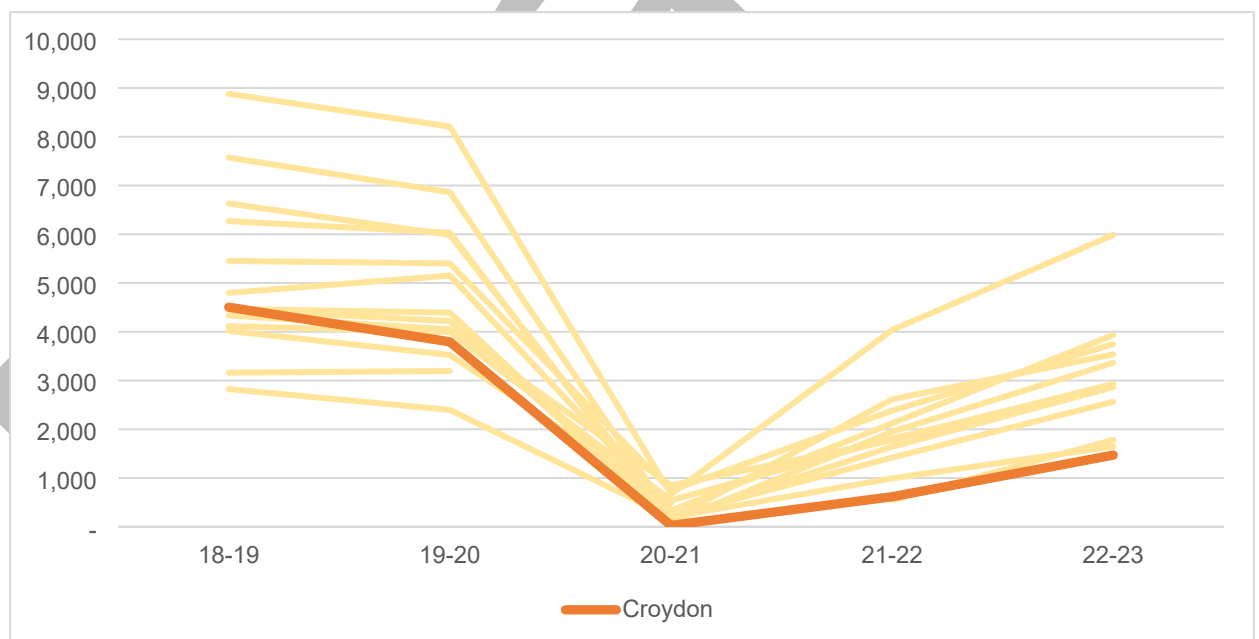
2.63   Of the 14 authorities participating in the survey, the mean 'recovery rate' was 64%, ie the visits per 1000 population in 2023-24 were on average 64% of the number of visits per 1000 in 2019/20. The median recovery rate was 72%. Croydon's recovery rate was only 39%.

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[6] The graph shows the trends for the 14 authorities that participated and submitted the relevant data in the CIPFA annual library survey in at least four of the five years between 2018-19 and 2022-23. All 14 participated in 2018-19 and 2022-23.

2.64   As a result, Croydon is now bottom of the 14 participants in 2022-23, with just 1,471 per 1000 population compared with a mean of 3,091 (the median was very close to the mean).

2.65   Other indicators show similar results with book issues per 1000 in 2022-23 now second bottom of the 15 participants at 1,206 in a range between 1,125 and 4,143). The of the participants in the survey, the mean 'recovery rate' was 94%, ie the visits per 1000 population in 2023-24 were on average 94% of the number of visits per 1000 in 2019/20. The median recovery rate was 85%. Croydon's recovery rate was only 73%.

Figure A2.4: total physical book issues per 1000 population[7]

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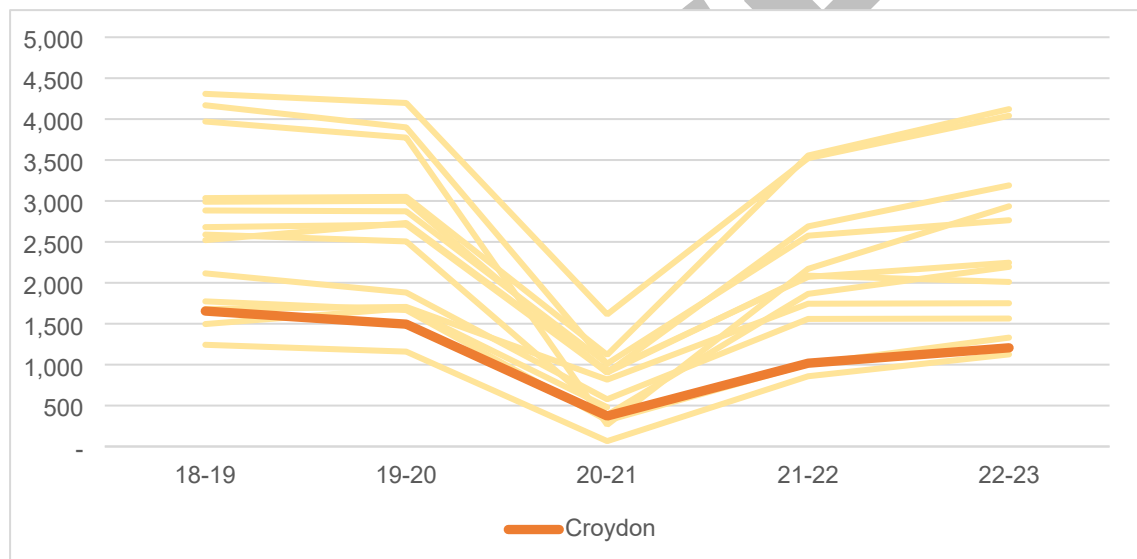
[7] The graph shows the trends for the 15 authorities that participated and submitted the relevant data in the CIPFA annual library survey in at least four of the five years between 2018-19 and 2022-23. All 15 participated in 2018-19 and 2022-23.

2.66   The trend in eBook issues shows a significant increase in Croydon's absolute and comparative performance. In a range between 35[8] and 488 eBook issues per 1000 population in 2022-23, Croydon's figure of 262 significantly higher than both the mean of 208 and the median of 206.

Figure A2.5: total eBook issues per 1000 population[9]
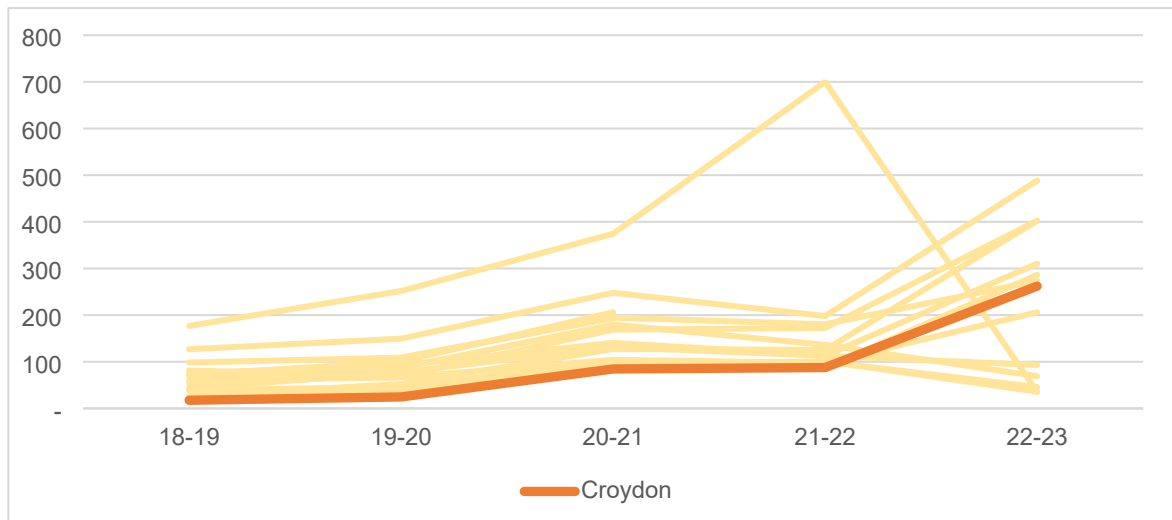
2.67   Despite the growth in eBook issues, Croydon's number of active borrowers remains low. In 2022-23 there was a range[9] between 48 (Croydon's figure) and 282 per 1000 population. The median was 94 and the mean 98.

Figure A2.6: active borrowers[10] per 1000 population

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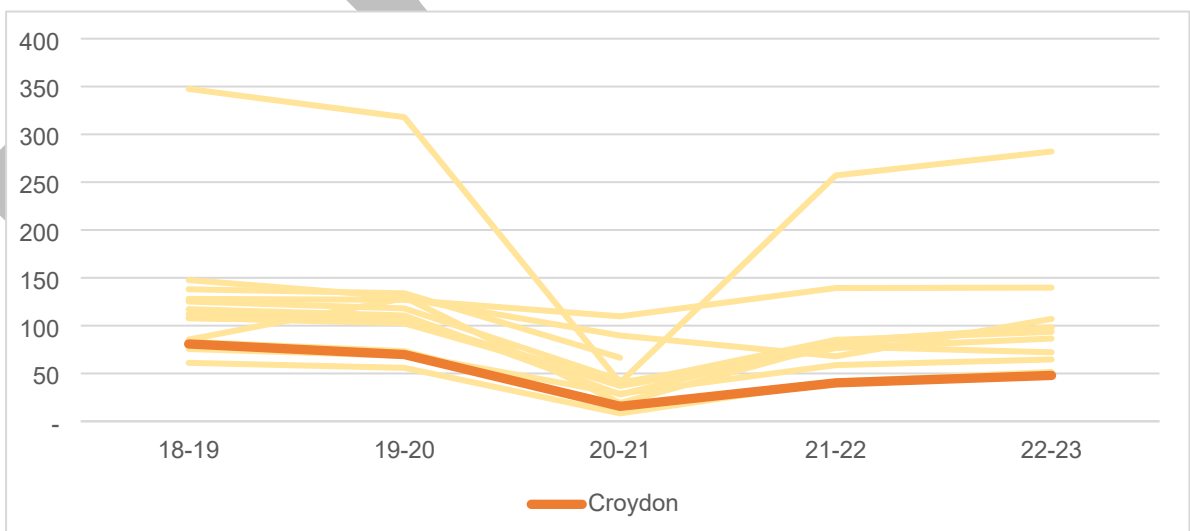
[8] This figure (or previous years' figures) supplied by one authority may have errors given previous trend data.
[9] The graph shows the trends for the 15 authorities that participated and submitted the relevant data in the CIPFA annual library survey in at least four of the five years between 2018-19 and 2022-23. All 15 participated in 2018-19 and 2022-23.
[10] 'Active borrowers' are library users who have borrowed 1 or more physical or digital items in the preceding 12 months.

2.68 Croydon's expenditure per 1000 population was and remains bottom of the 15 participants in this indicator as illustrated below. Its expenditure fell further in 2022-23 Croydon's expenditure per 1000 population was £7,337 in 2022-23; the mean was £15,304 and the median £13,475.

Figure A2.7: total expenditure (£s) per 1000 population[11]
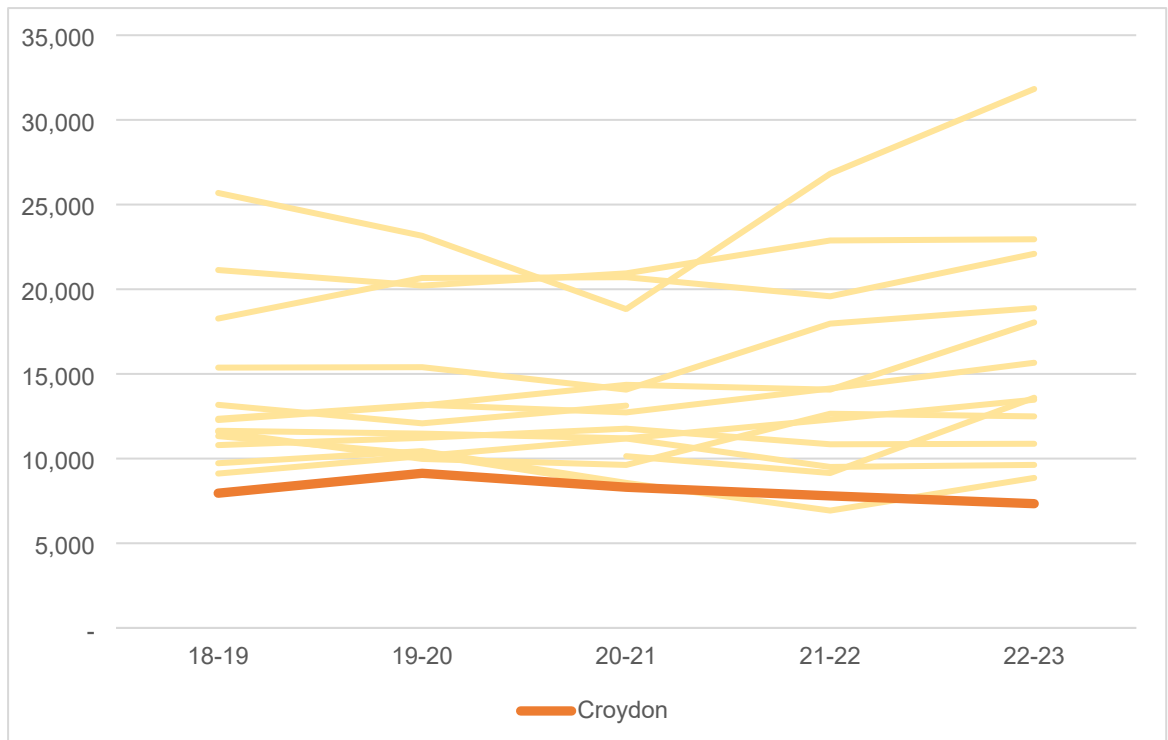
Croydon

2.69 The 2022-23 CIPFA annual library survey is the first year which includes the impact of the reduction in opening hours in April 2022. With the exception of the impressive increase in eBook lending, Croydon's comparative performance has remained poor and its comparative expenditure remains low.

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[11] The graph shows the trends for the 15 authorities that participated and submitted the relevant data in the CIPFA annual library survey in at least four of the five years between 2018-19 and 2022-23. All 15 participated in 2018-19 and 2022-23.

Summary of developments since January 2024

2.70   Since the report recommending changes to the library service was presented to Croydon's Cabinet on 31 January 2024, a number of developments have taken place, but the underlying picture remains largely the same: finances are tight; the library services' budget is low and its performance is poor.

Table A2.4: developments since the January 2024 report

- Public consultations on the proposals to change the library service have taken place.

- The Council set its budget for 2024-25 which included plans for large savings in other services (including other statutory services) but no requirements for new budget reductions as a result of the library services review.

- A General Election took place in which both major parties were judged by independent commentators to have accepted the OBR's calculation that spending by 'unprotected departments' (such as local government) would have to fall by 2.3% per annum in real terms.

- The Council has adopted a new transformation strategy, Future Croydon, which involves significant changes to the way the Council operates and services its customers against a background of difficult financial constraints.

- The London Borough of Culture has successfully completed its work and reported its plans for the legacy from the programme.

- The full year of library service performance figures for 2023-24 are now available and demonstrate some continuing improvement in borrowing figures, but all other indicators remain markedly lower compared with pre-pandemic levels.

- Data from CIPFA's annual library survey show that Croydon's spending remains low and performance poor in comparison with other London Boroughs participating in the survey.

3. Summary of consultation findings

Introduction

3.1 In this section we present the headlines from the public consultation. Reference is made to the key findings from the previous rounds of consultation in 2021 in which a series of three options were presented for consultation and led to the changes which were implemented in 2022 to move to part-time opening.

3.2 The full analysis of the data from the current round of consultation is contained in Appendix 3. In this section, we summarise the consultation methodology including the different channels used. We then highlight the main findings from each section of the consultation:

- The overall response to the proposals

- The proposal to create nine 'library hubs'

- The proposal to create three 'community hubs

- The proposal to close four libraries at Bradmore Green, Broad Green, Sanderstead and Shirley.

3.3 Each sub-section below highlights the main findings from the public survey, then brings these together in a summary alongside the qualitative findings from all consultation channels.

Summary of 2021 consultation

3.4 The Council conducted two rounds of consultation in March and July 2021. The first round of consultation focused on people's priorities for the library service, including a range of aspirations to improve facilities and activities. It also highlighted a widespread belief among consultees that the library service had an important role in bridging the digital divide.

3.5 Extending opening hours beyond those pre-Covid was also a priority among respondents, with many saying they were not suited to their needs, particularly outside normal working hours.

3.6 In the July consultation, residents were presented with three options for the library service to manage a cut in its budget of £500,000. Feedback included:

- In response to the Option 1 proposal (**reduce library hours by 21%**): **56% agreed, or strongly agreed**; 37% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

- In response to the Option 2 proposal (o**utsource the management of all 13 libraries**): 17% agreed, or strongly agreed; **70% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.**

- In response to the Option 3 (**five community run libraries and reduced opening hours for eight libraries**) proposal: 25% agreed, or strongly agreed; **58% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.**

3.7 There were a number of **recurring themes** in the wider consultation feedback which the Council indicated it would incorporate into the library service's 'new operating model to improve services':

- Better **publicity about opening hours and activities.**
- **Call on resident associations and other community networks for support**.
- **Digital services support sessions** for use of online resources.
- **Volunteering** to support the libraries.

3.8 The Equalities Impact Assessment identified that specific user groups (**especially families with young children; adults without digital access; unemployed people; seniors, and school children**) were **likely to be disproportionately affected** by any changes to Croydon's library service offer.

3.9 Following the consultation, the Council implemented Option 1, to reduce opening hours at libraries, accompanied by a number of mitigations including the introduction of self-service access (Open+) and increased volunteering. (See Section X).

Reach of the 2024 consultation activities

Summary of engagement activities

3.10 The 2024 consultation used ten in-person and online channels ranging from public meetings, workshops with community groups and an online survey. These are summarised below in table 3.n.

3.11 Section X.X of the consultation report details the number of consultation ''actions' by participants across the range of consultation channels. In total we estimate the volume of participation to be over 8,000 actions, which includes multiple actions by individuals participants (for example attending a public meeting, completing the survey and submitting an email).

3.12 Deliberately, the in-person events focused on those libraries at risk of closure. Understandably, the reactive channels including the survey and consultation email also received a greater number of responses from users of these libraries than the proportion of active users from these libraries in the overall total of Croydon library users (see section X.X).

3.13 A number of consultation activities, including drop-ins and officer engagement have sought to target particular groups whose needs are potentially not currently met through the library service, including young people and members of global majority communities. However, they are still under-represented among consultation participants.

Table A3.1: Summary of engagement activities, with descriptions

Description
Online briefing: An initial online briefing to launch the consultation, hosted by Cllr Stranack, to present the proposals
Public meetings: Structured public meetings held near or at the four Croydon libraries proposed for closure. Open to all. Hosted by Members/Officers.
Public drop-in sessions: Informal public discussions, offering opportunities for more informal unstructured conversation, held at all Croydon library sites or nearby buildings. Open to all. Hosted by Members/Officers.
Internal workshops: Small group briefings with key Council staff, including Union and volunteer representatives.
External workshops: Workshops with key Council partners, community groups, Friends groups and representative groups from the Croydon community. Hosted and facilitated by Council Officers with preparatory support from Activist
Internal briefings: Small group briefings with key Council staff, including Union and volunteer representatives.
External briefings: Small group briefings with external Council and library partners, local community representatives and members of the public.
Community events: Attendance by key Council officers at pre-arranged community events, or outreach opportunities, across a number of external locations across Croydon. These included engagement with children and young people via HAF camps, school sessions and youth bud, and on-street outreach.
Petitions: 6 petitions were submitted by the date of the closure of formal consultation, coordinated by local community groups, sharing their views on the proposals. Additionally a seventh petition from users of Shirley library was submitted after the closure of the consultation, which has also been taken into account.
Consultation email: Emails submitted by members of the public and other interested parties to the Croydon Council consultation email address setup specifically for receiving feedback or asking questions about the consultation and proposals.
Public Survey: designed by Activist and Croydon's project team, hosted by on the Council's consultation platform, Get Involved. The public were invited to share their thoughts on the proposals (see Annex ii of Appendix B for survey questionnaire). The survey was designed to take no more than 15 minutes. The survey was widely publicised via the Council's communication channels and in each library. The survey was launched on Thursday 8th February 2024 and was closed on Friday 19th April 2024. Paper copies of the survey were available from 13th February.

2024 Consultation findings - feedback on the current service

3.14   The survey captured 3,614 responses (online, and paper copies received and then manually entered by Council officers).

3.15   It is important to consider the potential impact of the proposed changes on all Croydon residents, from all demographic backgrounds and range of engagement with the library service. However, looking at the profile of survey respondents we observe several differences in response rates by demographic profile and library usage.

3.16   The responses are heavily weighted towards:

- Frequent and regular users of the library service.
- Users of some of the libraries proposed for closure.
- People of white ethnicities.
- Women

3.17   Under-represented groups include:

- Users of some libraries proposed as 'library hubs', particularly Central.
- Non-users of the library service.
- People from non-white ethnic backgrounds.
- Children and Young people.
- Men.

3.18   There is very strong support for the library service, each individual library and a general feeling they are valued local assets doing a great job, Notwithstanding this, many people have criticisms about previous cuts to the library service, and individual concerns about the level and standard of service across the network.

3.19   Among survey respondents who were library users, the most popular services were 'Borrowing books and reading materials', 'Taking children to an activity' and 'Attending an arts or cultural event'. This was broadly consistent with the findings of the 2021 consultation in which the most important services to users were 'browsing and borrowing books'; 'Rhymetimes/children's activities'; 'Space to work or research' and 'Using computers'.

Figure A3.1: Most popular library services among survey respondents (3,178 responses)

Legend:
- Borrowing books and other materials
- Taking children to an activity
- Attending an arts or culture event
- Getting information or advice from staff
- Attending learning activities
- Downloading ebooks and other materials online
- Other
- Online research tools
- Reading newspapers online
- Spaces available to hold events
- Online games

Values: 2,710; 1,210; 635; 553; 546; 422; 308; 272; 163; 99; 16

3.20 The key motivations for visiting libraries among survey respondents were 'convenient location', 'a good range of physical materials to borrow', and 'convenient opening hours'.

Figure A3.2: Key motivations for visiting Croydon libraries (3,179 responses)

Legend:
- Convenient location
- Range of physical materials
- Convenient opening hours
- Staff to help and give advice
- Interesting events
- A quiet place to read
- Getting out and meeting people
- Access to computers
- Access other services
- Ebooks and other material
- Access to WiFi
- Other
- Finding what I want to download

Values: 2444; 1629; 1621; 832; 809; 521; 346; 175; 122; 115; 99; 86; 68; 46; 41

Non-users

3.21   Non-users of Croydon's libraries (defined as those who never visit a library, or 'rarely visit', meaning more than a year ago) were also asked the reasons for not visiting. Of 318 responses, the most common reasons were 'opening hours aren't convenient for me', 'I can find what I need online' and 'I buy books when I want to read'.

Self-service

3.22   A plurality of survey respondents are cautious about using self-service but open to doing so in the future, and evidence from those libraries where it is available suggest that the concerns of many people can be addressed.

3.23   21% of respondents said they would never use a library that was unstaffed, and 7% said they had tried self-service access and did not like it. Conversely, 17% said they had used self-service access and really liked it. 54% of respondents had not used self-service access but were open to using it in the future.

3.24   People mainly using the online library are generally positive about it but many respondents had criticisms about accessibility and current technical issues.

Views on the financial drivers for the proposals

3.25   There are mixed views about the relationship between the Council's finances and the current proposals. Many users are critical of decisions under a previous administration to cut opening hours and the strategy of the current administration. A large number of people do not support closing libraries in order to extend hours elsewhere and would prefer priorities and alternatives to be re-examined.

Feedback on the previous changes, ie the reduction in opening hours.

3.26   Overwhelmingly, participants are critical of the outcome from the last round of cuts to opening hours and the impact it has had on access to library services.

3.27   Consultation feedback confirms the findings in the Phase 1/2 report that library users are very negative about the impact of the reduction in opening hours in 2022. Many respondents also cited the reduction in opening hours as a driver for the lower usage which was cited as evidence of poor performance in formulating the proposals under consultation.

Overall feedback on the proposals

3.28   The survey included four questions which asked people to rate the proposals as a whole;

- for the difference the proposals would make overall to the library service in Croydon;
- the difference they would make to visiting at a time convenient for them;

- the difference they would make to visiting a library near to where they live, work or study;

- and the difference they would make to their ability to access other council and community services.

3.29 The responses revealed that two thirds of respondents were negative (they would make it much worse/a little worse) about the proposals overall (66%) as opposed to positive (they would make it much better/a little better) (28%) and neutral (it won't make much difference) (6%).

Figure A3.3: What overall difference do you think the proposals will make to the library service in Croydon (3,552 responses)
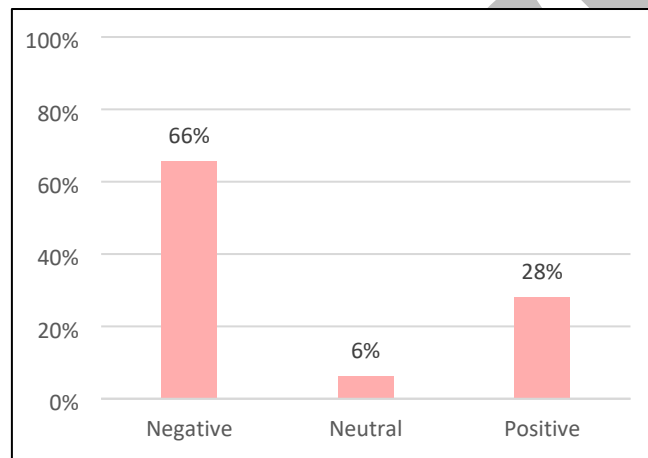
3.30 Almost half (49%) of respondents said it would impact negatively on their ability to visit a library at a convenient time.

Figure A3.4: Impact on visiting a library at a convenient time (3,579 responses)
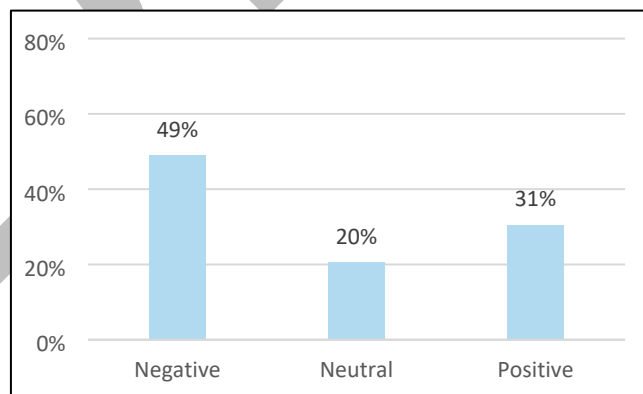
3.31 Half of respondents said the proposals would make it more difficult (a lot/a little) to visit a library close to where I live, work or study. 25% said it would make it easier (a lot/a little) and 25% said it would make no difference.

Figure A3.5: Impact on visiting a library close to where I live, work or study (3,567 responses)
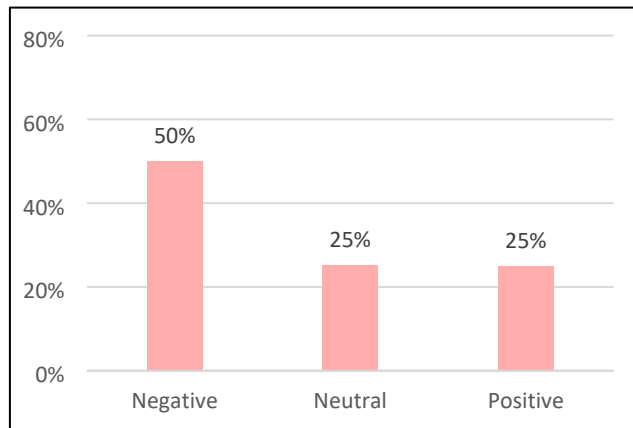
3.32 A plurality of respondents (41%) said it would make it harder (a lot/a little) to access other council services or community activities. 20% said it would make it easier (a lot/a little), 39% said it would make no difference (3,540 responses).

3.33 Given the variable response rate between users of different libraries, the responses were also weighted by the number of active users at each library. The weighted responses are still show a small majority (52%) are negative about the proposals whereas 39% are positive about the overall impact of the proposals.

Figure A3.6: Responses to overall impact weighted by active user figures (3,552 responses)
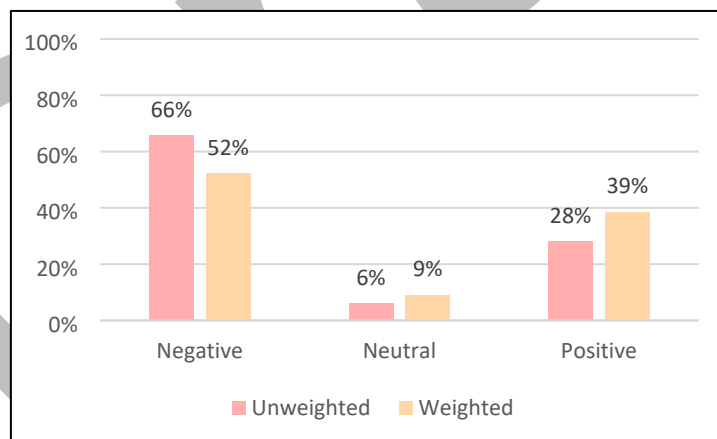
3.34 When the responses to the other questions on the overall impact of the proposals are also weighted by each library's number of active users, we see small but significant changes in the balance between negative and positive responses, but with larger proportions of neutral responses. The balance between negative and positive responses to the impact on people's ability to visit a library at a time convenient to them is moderately more positive (42%) than negative (27%). The proportion of 'neutral responses' also increase to 31%.

Table A3.2: Impact of proposals both unweighted and weighted[12]

	Negative		Neutral		Positive	
	Unweighted	Weighted	Unweighted	Weighted	Unweighted	Weighted
Overall impact	66%	52%	6%	9%	28%	39%
Visit a library at a time convenient for me	49%	27%	20%	31%	31%	42%
Visit a library close to where I live, work or study	50%	27%	25%	39%	25%	34%
Access other council services or community activities	41%	23%	39%	51%	20%	26%

Table A3.3: Summary of overall views on the proposals from all consultation channels

- The majority of survey respondents were negative about the overall impact of the proposals. Those respondents who primarily visit the four libraries proposed for closure were understandably more negative than the users of the other libraries.
- When responses are weighted by the number of active users at each library, there remains a small majority who say the impact will be negative overall.
- When weighted by the number of active users at each library, the balance of responses is net positive for the impact on convenience of opening hours, location, and access to other council and community services.
- A handful of individuals acknowledged the overall benefits of the proposals for Croydon's library service as a whole, including for their local libraries.
- Strong concerns were heard across all libraries about the impact of the proposed closures, demonstrating significant solidarity among users of libraries where opening hours are proposed to be extended.
- There was evidence of considerable uncertainty around the definition of the proposed model including the distinction between 'library hubs' and 'community hubs', the extent to which longer opening hours will be staffed or enabled by Open+, and scepticism about what 'outreach' will amount to and how feasible it will be to find suitable locations in the communities affected by closures.
- A large number of participants criticised the Council's recent record of financial management and felt that the library service had been underinvested in over many years.
- Among users of the four libraries proposed for closure, a significant theme was unhappiness that libraries in the south of the borough had been targeted for closure, while investment was focused in central/north areas.

12

Feedback on library hub proposals

3.35 The survey asked whether the extension of opening hours at the six proposed library hubs would make a difference to their ability to visit the library. 52% of respondents said it would make no difference, 25% said it would make it a little easier, while 23% said it would make it much easier. It should be noted that this question did not include the option for respondents to answer that the extended opening hours would make it more difficult for them to visit the library.[13]

3.36 When analysed by library type, (those libraries proposed for closure, proposed library hubs and proposed community hubs) respondents whose primary library affiliation was a library proposed for closure were less positive about the value of the library hub proposal compared to users of library hubs or community hubs. It is clear that many users of proposed library hubs and community hubs see the proposal as purely negative if it is achieved through closure of the libraries they currently use.

Figure A3.7: What difference would the library hubs proposal with extended hours make to your ability to use the library more often (by library group)? (3,508 responses)
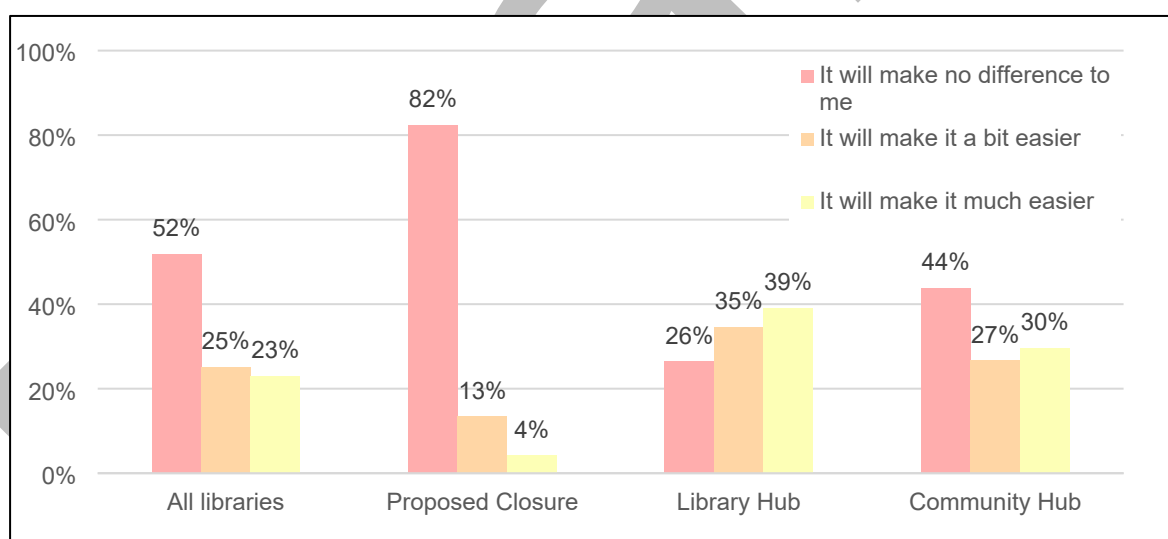
3.37 Examining the responses by each individual library, we see some differences also within these three groups of libraries. Among the four proposed for closure, the responses are uniformly negative, reflecting the views of the large majority of their users who view these proposals as negative for them because library hub hours would only be extended by closing the libraries which they use.

3.38 Among community hub library users, the balance between negative and positive responses is broadly similar.

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[13] A small number of respondents complained via email that the wording of this question was biased and precluded a strictly negative response along a balanced scale.

3.39   However, within the proposed library hub group, those using Central Library are markedly less positive about the benefits to them than users of other libraries, perhaps resulting from the relatively smaller increase in hours predicted at Central Library compared to the other five locations.

Figure A3.8: What difference would the library hubs proposal with extended hours make to your ability to use the library more often (by individual library)? (3,508 responses)
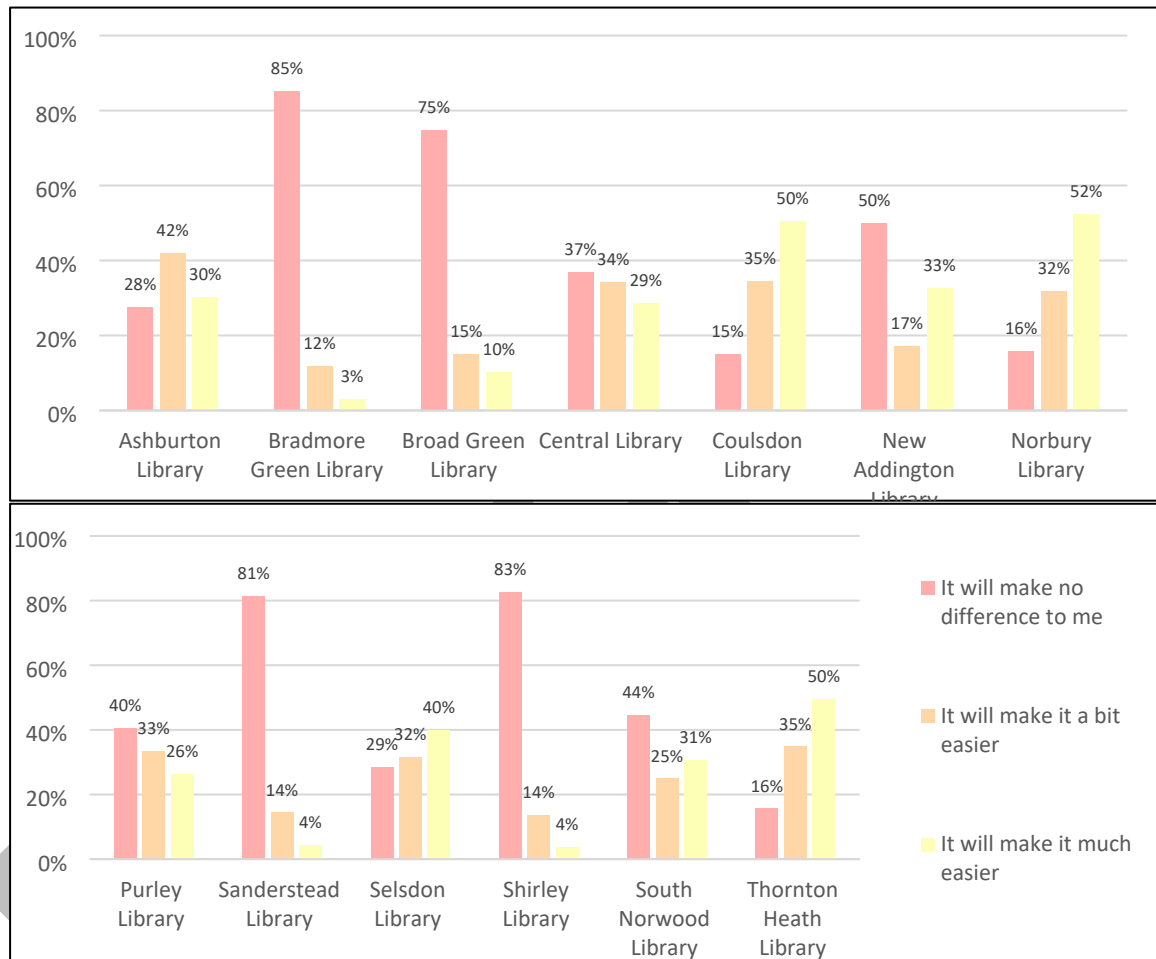
3.40   Looking at respondents' views according to their frequency of library use, the proportion saying it will make it a bit easier to visit a library was moderately higher for lower frequency visitors (occasional, non-user and home/online users).

Figure A3.9: What difference would the library hubs proposal with extended hours make to your ability to use the library more often (by frequency)? (3,485 responses)
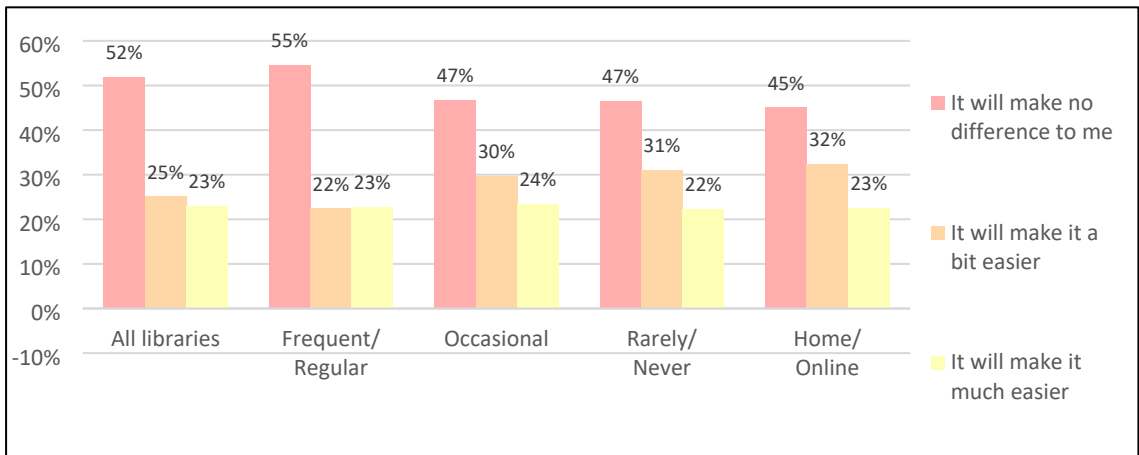
Table A3.4 Summary of findings on library hubs proposal from all consultation channels

Impact of extending opening hours for 'Library Hubs'

- A narrow majority of all survey respondents did not see any benefit in extending opening hours at library hubs for them.
- However, among survey respondents who are users of the six libraries proposed as new library hubs, a majority of respondents said it would make it easier to access the library service.
- Despite this, a large number of participants who are users of proposed library hubs expressed the view in a range of consultation channels, that while extending opening hours would be a benefit for them, they did not want this to happen as a result of closing libraries in other communities.
- A handful of individuals were critical of the Library Hub concept being proposed.
- Many additional ideas were suggested for consideration as part of the Library Hub concept, or raised specific queries about how it would work.

Making full use of the buildings open longer including on Saturdays

- A large number of suggestions were made to make full use of the buildings with extended opening hours, including a range of community uses, increasing the number of existing popular activities, particularly for children; developing a range of new programmes including arts, health and wellbeing, and learning, and alternative uses of internal space for different users.

Further improvements to the offer at proposed library hubs

- A large number of participants shared their thoughts about other improvements that would enhance the Library Hub offer being proposed. These included further enhancing opening hours including Sundays and more events; better marketing and promotion of the offer; improvements to the physical fabric of libraries; upgrading technology; transport or travel support; more staffing and/or using volunteers, and working more with local partners.

The impact on people with protected characteristics

- A large number of respondents identified a wide potential range of positive and negative impacts, or concerns, for library users possessing protected characteristics as a result of the Library Hub proposals being implemented, including better servicing needs for older people disabled people and global majority communities. Negative impacts suggested related mainly to current users of libraries proposed for closure who, it was said, would be unable to access services at library hubs. Positive comments related mainly to the current barrier of restricted opening hours.

Feedback on community hub proposals

Overall views on the proposals - benefits and disadvantages

3.41 The survey asked how positive or negative people they felt about the proposal to develop New Addington, Purley and South Norwood as "'community hubs' run in partnership with other council services and community organisations". Overall respondents were slightly more positive (very positive/somewhat positive 39%) than negative (very negative/somewhat negative, 33%%).

3.42 The most frequent single response was 'neither positive or negative' (27%), which is consistent with many free text responses that respondents were unclear about the concept of 'community hubs' for these libraries. When broken down by primary library affiliation we see that users of the four libraries proposed for closure were the only group to be more negative than positive about the community hub proposal.

Figure A3.10: How positive or negative do you feel about the proposal to develop three libraries as new community hubs? (3,552 responses)
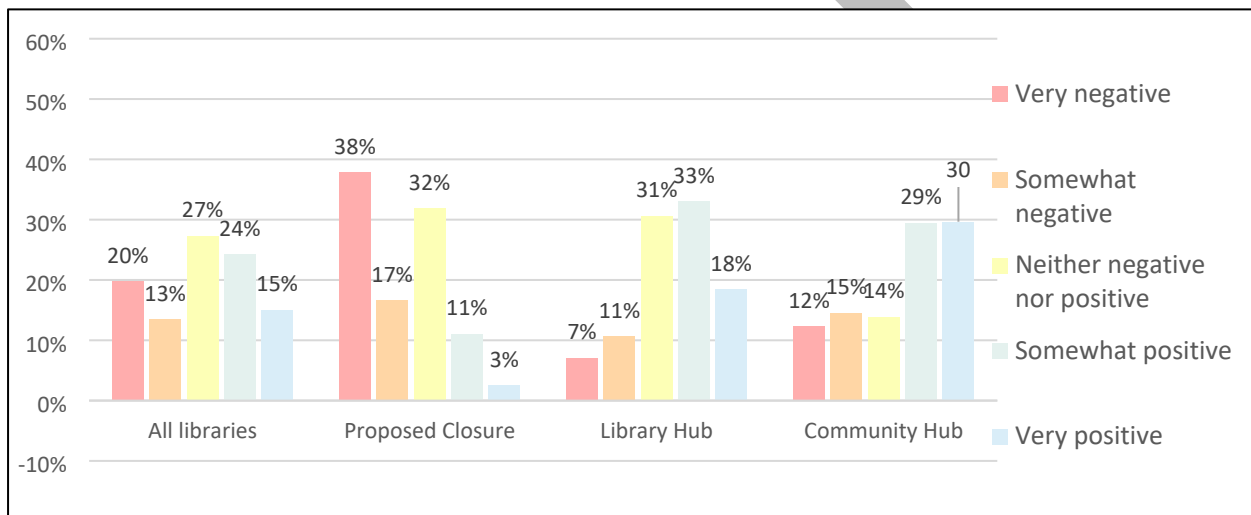
3.43 When the total responses are analysed by frequency of library use we find that frequent library visitors were most negative about the community hub proposal, with non-users, and online or home library users most positive.

3.44 When these responses are weighted by the number of active users at each library, the proportion of respondents who were very negative reduced considerably, while the rest of the responses increased slightly, but generally remained in relatively similar proportions. This reflects the greater number of respondents from libraries that are proposed to close compared to users of other libraries and that these respondents were generally more negative towards changes than other respondents. It should be noted that those who rarely/never visited, or who used libraries from home/online were not included in the weighting as these were not included in the question about which library they visited most.

3.45 There was also a proportionally lower response from people using New Addington Library, one of the proposed 'community hubs', suggesting additional engagement and analysis of other data related to need is required in developing the model further for this community.

Figure A3.12: Responses to community hub proposals weighted by active users across the library service (3,156 responses)
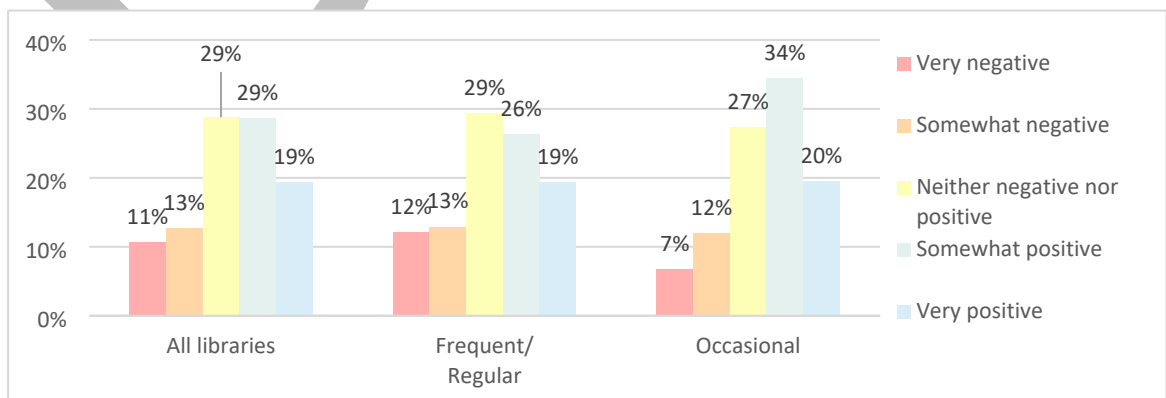
3.46 The survey also asked what services people would prioritise alongside the library in new community hubs. The three most popular options were arts and cultural

services, adult education classes and children's education classes. 577 (17%) said they needed more information about the proposal.

Figure A3.13: Which services would you prioritise alongside the library in new community hubs? (3,328 responses)
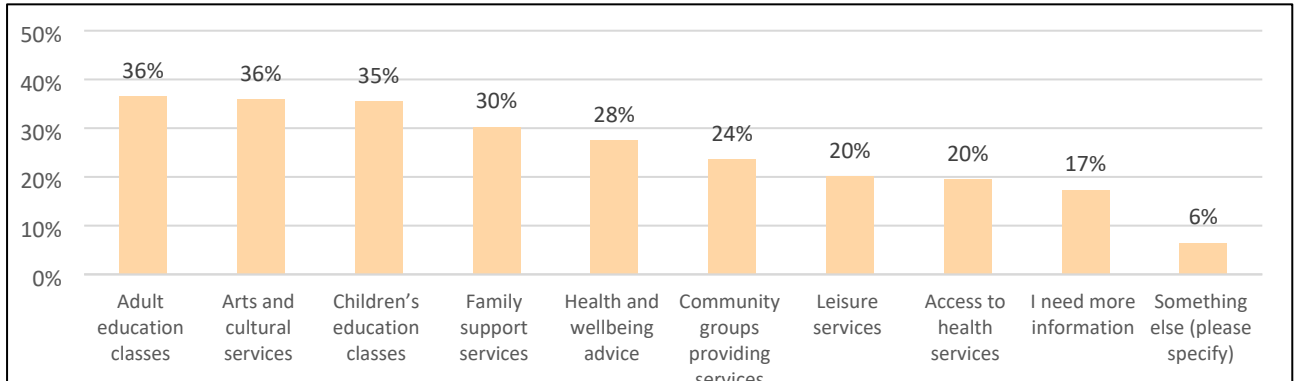
3.47 A handful of survey respondents (13) voiced opposition to the concept in the free text box for other suggestions, particularly from the perspective of users of libraries proposed for closure.

Table A3.5: Summary of findings on community hubs proposals from all consultation channels

> **Impact of extending opening hours for 'Community Hubs'**
>
> - There is strong support for extending the opening hours at the three libraries proposed as 'community hubs'. However, there is considerable opposition to this being achieved by closing other libraries.
>
> - There was a significant lack of understanding among many responses about what the 'community hub' model would look like, which generated a wide range of reactions from positive to negative, and scepticism about what it would entail.
>
> - There were also a number of concerns expressed about how well developed the 'community hub' model was, lack of clarity about the future location of these three sites, and exactly how they would work with other services.
>
> - There were many suggestions for a wide range of services which could be included, including many specific to each community, but adult education, children's activities and arts and cultural activities were the most popular responses in the survey.
>
> **Making better use of buildings open longer including on Saturdays:**
>
> - Among the suggestions made to make better use of longer opening hours, many of these reflected similar preferences for proposed library hubs.

- The needs of a wide range of users were identified for programmes at the proposed community hubs. These included families (including those with SEN or low-income support needs); parents; grandparents; carers; school age children (primary and teenagers); home educators; retired people; elderly residents; adults with special educational needs; people in need or crisis; adults with disabilities; the digitally excluded, people experiencing loneliness, and those experiencing homelessness.

Other improvements to the offer at proposed community hubs:

- A number of participants shared their thoughts about the possible other improvements that could be put in place to enhance the Community Hub offer being proposed. These reflected similar preferences to the users of proposed library hubs, including further opening hour adjustments; improved marketing and promotion of the service offer; improvements to the physical fabric of buildings, including technology; transport or travel support; more staffing and/or using volunteers, and better working with local partners.

The specific impacts on people with protected characteristics

- A significant number of participants identified detrimental impacts on library users possessing protected characteristics as a result of the proposals being implemented. These were principally current users of libraries proposed for closure who, it was suggested would no longer be able to access the library service, including older people; disabled people; those facing mental health or physical health challenges; global majority communities.

- Conversely a small number of people pointed to the benefits of the community hub model and outreach in engaging more people with a range of needs in the community, particularly those with mental health challenges, the digitally excluded, disabled people and global majority communities.

Feedback on closure proposals

Overall views on the proposals - benefits and disadvantages

3.48   The users of the four libraries proposed for closure were understandably the most negative about the impact. When the number of responses is weighted by the share of active users at each library, the gap between negative and positive responses is smaller. (See paragraph 3.XX above.)

3.49   However, even among users of proposed library hubs and community hubs, those who are more positive about the changes often gave additional feedback through the survey free text boxes, consultation email and in public meetings, that demonstrated solidarity with those using the four libraries proposed for closure. Many people are reluctant to advocate improvements to their libraries at the cost of closing libraries in other parts of the borough.

3.50   Users of the four libraries proposed for closure were also the most negative about the impact of the proposed changes on the other factors which were polled – convenient location, convenient opening hours, and ability to access other council and community services.

Table A3.6: Response of users of the four libraries proposed for closure to the proposals

		All responses			Users of libraries proposed for closure		
		Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Overall	%	66%	6%	28%	97%	2%	1%
	n	2334	220	998	1271	26	18
	Total	3552	3552	3552	1315	1315	1315
Visit a library at a time convenient for me	%	49%	20%	31%	93%	5%	2%
	n	1754	733	1092	1221	64	32
	Total	3579	3579	3579	1317	1317	1317
Visit a library close to where I live, work or study	%	50%	25%	25%	93%	4%	3%
	n	1784	896	887	1225	46	42
	Total	3567	3567	3567	1313	1313	1313
Access other council services or community activities	%	41%	39%	20%	77%	21%	2%
	n	1442	1393	705	999	278	23
	Total	3540	3540	3540	1300	1300	1300

3.51   Users of these four libraries were also far less positive about the proposals to extend opening hours at proposed library hubs and community hubs, demonstrating almost universal opposition among users of these libraries to the trade-off in opening hours.

Impact of proposed closures on those using these libraries

Figure A3.14: If four libraries were to close, which other libraries would you visit (1,303 responses)?
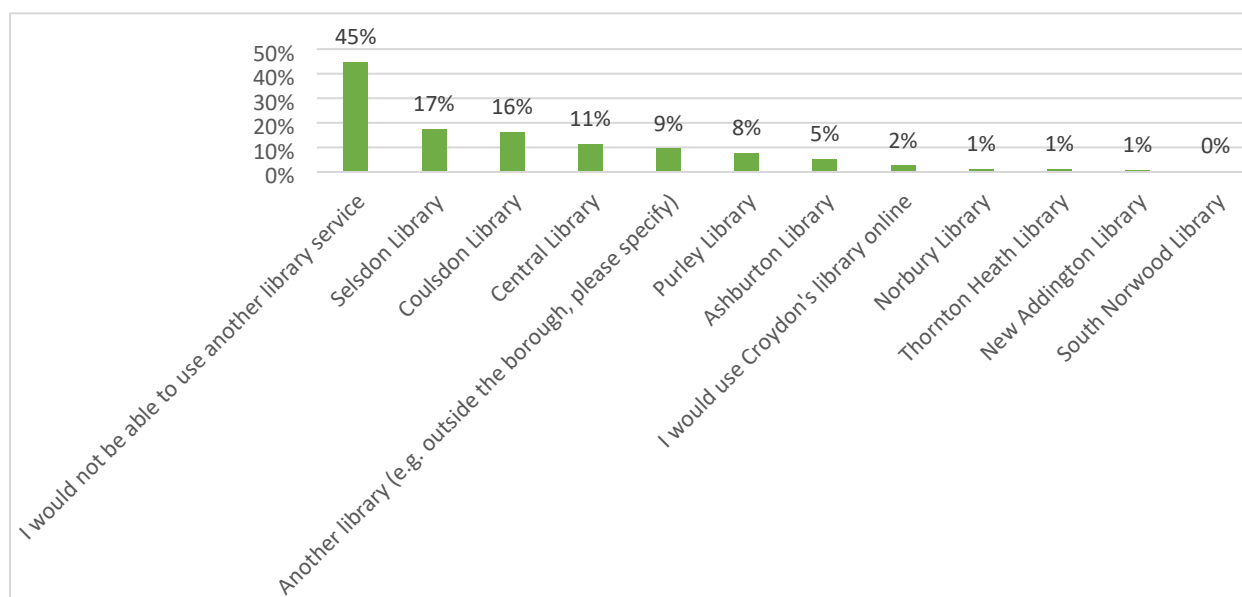
3.52 Nearly half of respondents to this question (583, 45%) said they would not be able to use another library service.

3.53 A number of libraries outside the borough were mentioned as alternatives by 122 respondents - Caterham, Bromley, West Wickham (closed for refurbishment), Warlingham, Sutton, though several of these responses underlined they would need to drive or take public transport rather than walk.

3.54 Further analysis of these responses shows that proportion of respondents saying they would be unable to use another library service decreased with age (noting that the sample sizes for the youngest and oldest age cohorts were much smaller than the middle cohorts).

Table A3.7 Summary of findings across all consultation channels

- Across all consultation channels, there is almost universal opposition to closures and the permanent loss of community assets and a fear of the impact, particularly for those with specific needs or protected characteristics.
- There is a significant community of existing users who prefer restricted hours at a convenient location, particularly one within walking distance.
- There is a strong feeling among users of the libraries proposed for closure that they have been let down by the previous changes to hours.
- There is a common view, particularly among users of the libraries directly affected, that they represent one of very few, or possibly the only, freely or easily accessible community assets.

    The specific impacts on people with protected characteristics

- A large number of responses identified a wide range of detrimental impacts on library users possessing protected characteristics as a result of the proposals being implemented, including older people; children and young families; disabled people; those facing mental health or physical health challenges, and global majority communities. For each library these were the groups most identified as at risk from the closure proposals:

    - Sanderstead Library: Older people, families with young children, disabled people.
    - Shirley Library: Older people, disabled people, those on low incomes.
    - Broad Green: Older people, global majority communities, those on low incomes.
    - Bradmore Green: Disabled people, families with young children, those on low incomes.

Needs or groups are not currently being served

- There is a widely-held view among both individuals but also community partners that the reduced opening hours are preventing many people from accessing the library service, particularly working families and children and young people, as well as an awareness that the library service currently isn't reaching many vulnerable people in the community who could benefit.
- A large number of participants shared ideas about reaching more people not currently using the library service. These included transport and travel support; extending opening hours at all libraries; better service promotion and marketing; improving safety.

Participants' views on outreach

- A wide range of views were expressed on the potential for outreach to mitigate closures, with many people sceptical or negative, while some people did think that outreach would help some people access the library service who do not currently use it.
- There is some willingness to explore outreach models, but preferably from a continuing library building, and scepticism about alternative sites apart from faith-based organisations.

Mitigations that could be put in place in the events of closures:

- A number of people shared their thoughts about the possible ideas that could be put in place to mitigate the effects of the proposed closures. These included identifying new partners to take over the building or a community managed model; more use of self-service access with support for users to become more comfortable with it; exploring alternative opening hours; the use of volunteers; providing toilet facilities elsewhere.
- A significant number of people suggested in different ways deferring a decision about closures to review further the financial options.

Interest from partners and the community in managing buildings:

- There is considerable support among users and supporters of libraries proposed for closure to examine further potential alternative models to keep library buildings operating.

- A wide range of suggestions and initial expressions of interest were shared by a number of people about potential community partners that could take over the existing Shirley, Bradmore Green, Broad Green and Sanderstead library buildings and/or provide an alternative service from the site. However, a number of these also outlined their initial concerns about the idea in principle.

Summary of consultation findings

3.55 The consultation reached a significant number of people across the borough and the rate of engagement compares well to similar consultations on changes to public libraries both previously in Croydon and in other local authorities. Inevitably, the consultation engaged mainly those currently using libraries, and engagement with a number of groups with protected characteristics who may be most affected by the proposals in a number of communities, is lower, suggesting the impact on these groups will need further analysis before a decision is taken on the results of the consultation.

3.56 Current library users are strongly supportive of the library service and a large number of consultation participants reject the Council's rationale for the proposed closures on a variety of grounds, principally that the previous reduction in hours has partly caused the service weaknesses identified in the previous report. Previous campaigns to oppose library closures, supported by the current administration, were frequently mentioned.

3.57 A number of participants suggested the analysis of performance at several libraries within the rationale for the proposals was flawed.

3.58 Understandably, users of the four libraries proposed for closure are the most negative about all aspects of the proposals. While users of those libraries where opening hours are to be extended are more positive about the benefits to them, there is considerable solidarity with users of libraries proposed for closure.

3.59 The survey received 3,614 responses. There was a clear majority which felt the overall impact of the proposals would be negative (66%). When weighted by the number of active users registered at each library, responses were more evenly balanced, with a small majority (52%) which said the overall impact was negative.

3.60 There is a clear divergence between those who prefer the convenience of being within easy walking distance of a library and those who would prioritise longer opening hours at fewer sites with an expanded offer. A large number of current users of libraries proposed for closure would prefer continued part-time opening to closures which release resources to improve the library offer at other sites, even with the mitigations proposed.

3.61 Longer opening hours were extremely popular with many respondents, particularly those who use or could use the libraries where this is proposed (with the caveat that a large number of participants do not want this to be at the expense of closing other libraries). The most cited or sought-after benefits of longer opening hours included a

larger programme of activities for children and adults, and safe, quiet space for work or study at more convenient times.

3.62   There is evidence of considerable uncertainty around the definition of the proposed model including the distinction between 'library hubs' and 'community hubs', the extent to which longer opening hours will be staffed or enabled by Open+, and scepticism about what 'outreach' will amount to and how feasible it will be to find suitable locations in the communities affected by closures.

3.63   There is also considerable cynicism about how the proposals will be implemented, particularly the proposed mitigations for library closures, with the experience of the previous round of changes cited as evidence.

3.64   There is considerable positivity among respondents about the benefits of self-service access (Open+). While a small but significant proportion of users say they would never use a library when it is not staffed, a larger proportion of respondents who haven't used it previously would be prepared to try it in the future. Responses from users of Selsdon and Norbury where it has been trialled indicates much higher levels of satisfaction.

3.65   Among those living in the catchment area of the four libraries proposed for closure who took part in the consultation, there was almost universal opposition to closures and a number of key concerns expressed about using other libraries, including accessibility without a car, parking, safety in Central Croydon and Coulsdon, and the impact on particular groups who would not be able to travel. These varied across the four libraries, but the main groups cited everywhere were children, working parents, particularly those with small children, the disabled, the isolated elderly, and residents in particular estates and among particular communities from the global majority.

3.66   A large number of responses suggested alternatives to the closure proposals as they currently stand. These included: revisiting the library budget; generating additional income for the library service through commercial partnerships, lettings and fundraising; maintaining the current part-time opening hours; investigating community-managed models, encouraging more volunteering to support library capacity.

3.67   Encouraging more volunteering was one of the most frequently cited alternatives suggested to avoid library closures, with many participants criticising previous or current efforts by the council to engage volunteers in libraries. However, discussions between Croydon Volunteer Action and Council officers suggest that volunteering in Croydon is at an all-time low since the pandemic and has yet to recover.

4. Responding to the consultation

About this section

4.1 In this section, we analyse the issues raised by the results of public consultation reported in the previous section. We summarise each of the principal issues that have emerged and then review the arguments in relation to each issue.

4.2 We then assess the evidence before reaching findings on each issue and making recommendations for how the issues should be addressed by the council. We have focused on those issues which have been the subject of the strongest feedback, while also considering less contentious issues.

4.3 We are conscious that this report is very long and so, where the issues raised have been explored in depth in previous reports, we summarise that work and cross-refer the source documents, using hyperlinks. For those reading hard copies of this document, the URL for each hyperlink is shown in a footnote.

Principal issues to review

Summary of principal issues and criticism

4.4 In section 3, we highlighted the strength of feeling on the part of those who took part in this round of consultation against the proposal to close four libraries. The opposition to closures was not limited to users of those libraries threatened with closure. A narrow majority of survey respondents who principally used other libraries were also opposed to the closures (although to a lesser degree).

4.5 As a result, we pay particular attention in this section to the closure proposals. However, there was a wealth of feedback raised that addressed other aspects of the Council's proposals, both in their own right and as alternatives to closure. **We have grouped the feedback into three principal issues:**

- **The proposed closure of libraries is opposed.**

- **The service needs improvement.**

- **Alternatives to closure should be found.**

4.6 The issues raised are summarised and then examined in turn in this section of the report. In addition, we have examined criticisms of how the consultation was carried out.

General criticism of closure proposals

Main points of critique

4.7   As summarised in section 3 above, the latest round of consultation confirmed the opposition to closures that was evident in the first round of consultation. In the first round of consultation, participants preferred the option of moving to part-time opening rather than closing libraries. That option suggested that hours would be reduced by 21%. Even though the actual reduction in staffed opening hours was closer to 50%, the majority of participants in the latest round of consultation continued to express a preference for libraries not to close.

Table A4.1: key points raised in opposition to closures

- **The majority of participants remain opposed to closures**: they do not accept closing libraries as a way of improving services. Even users of libraries which would open longer were opposed to closure.
- **Closures would have a severe effect on users in the communities concerned**: particularly people with protected characteristics, deprived people and global majority communities, among whom the most affected would struggle to use other libraries.
- **Closures would worsen the digital divide**: it would hit residents who do not have access to the internet and for whom e-lending is not a possibility.
- **Current users prefer to keep libraries open on a part-time basis**: this was seen as preferable to closures amid fears the buildings would be sold off.
- **The rationale for the closures proposed was questioned**: the choice of library and area affected was challenged on the basis of the usage figures since the pandemic and benchmarking with other authorities.
- **Poor transport options:** apart from losing valued local assets, the greatest concern was about lack of transport options to visit other libraries.

4.8   These points and more detailed points specific to each library have been reviewed in detail in Appendix C, the review of closure options. A short summary of the review of each library listing the findings and recommendations are show below.

Introduction

4.9   As set out in section 3, we have in this report reviewed all thirteen libraries following feedback from consultation on the proposals to improve the service by extending opening hours at some libraries, introducing more activities and events and conducting outreach. Given the pressure on finances, the Council's position is that these improvements are currently only feasible if resources are diverted from elsewhere in the library service.

4.10   The main way of releasing those resources would be to close a number of libraries. In this section we set out our approach to reassessing each library. We have based our analysis on a set of assessment criteria designed to address the gaps that need to be bridged in order to achieve the outcomes for the review:

Table A4.2: summary of assessment criteria for retaining a library

Criterion	Factors to consider
Performance	**Usage** including visits, issues and numbers of users. **Event attendances** and attendances for other activities. **PC hours in use.** - Unit costs, ie **cost per visitor**.
Location	- The **visibility** and prominence of the building. - The level of natural **footfall** in the vicinity. **Public transport access** for users.
Building	- The **suitability** of the building to accommodate the full range of library uses (ie Universal Offers). - The **adaptability** of the building to allow for various uses. - The overall **condition** of the building and the extent of remedial work required.
Population and need	- The **population** in a library's geographic catchment area. - The **extent of deprivation** in the catchment area. **Other libraries** in the vicinity. - The extent of **existing community group use**. - The **number of volunteers**.

4.11   The recommendations set out in this appendix are designed to improve the overall service and the four proposed closures are designed to release resources to invest in increasing the opening hours in the nine remaining libraries and to fund initiatives such as the introduction of targeted outreach for those most in need in the borough shown in sections 5 and 6 of this report.

Recommendations for the libraries to be retained

4.12   It is envisaged that the nine libraries recommended for retention are also subject to a range of improvements, including refurbishments, improved interior design and better signage. In some cases, it is recommended that opportunities should be sought for moving the library service to a better location and building. This would not be for immediate implementation but would take place over time as regeneration schemes develop that would allow change to be achieved in a cost-effective way. Any such changes to a building would need to be subject to a clear business case and further consultation.

Table A4.3: recommendations for libraries to be retained

Library	Recommendations
Ashburton	- That Ashburton Library is retained and improved. - That signage, interior design and furniture of the library are upgraded. - That event programming is expanded, supported by more active marketing and outreach. - That more community use and volunteering are encouraged.

Library	Recommendations
Central	• That the Central Library should be retained but improved. • That an alternative location should be sought in a more suitable building at the heart of the changing shopping district. • That, in the interim, investment is made in the interior design that could be easily transferred to a new location.
Coulsdon	• That Coulsdon Library is retained as the main library for residents living in Coulsdon Town and Old Coulsdon. • That investment is made in refurbishing the library's interior to improve its design and make it more adaptable. • That remodeling of the library is explored with the aim to provide direct access to the community garden. • That further involvement of the Hive in the work of the library is considered.
New Addington	• That New Addington Library is retained but its location and operating model reviewed. • That the location of the library is reviewed, including the potential for the New Addington Centre to become more vibrant. • That the barriers to library use in New Addington are assessed and active outreach is introduced. • That the Council explores partnership models of service delivery to improve the offer and attraction for residents.
Norbury	• That Norbury Library is retained and its operating model reviewed. • That the operating model for the building is reviewed including options to license space for hire or tenancy to generate income and footfall. • That the Council explores with community organisations their interest in the building and/or community management of the library. • That further research is conducted into barriers to library use in areas of high deprivation in Norbury for active outreach.
Purley	• That Purley Library is retained but its relocation considered. • That the Council seeks a better location and more suitable building for Purley Library.

Library	Recommendations
Selsdon	• That Selsdon Library Service is retained and improved. • That the events programme is expanded, supported by more active marketing and outreach, so that it can play a more active part in the cultural and community life in the south of the borough. • That improved signage is introduced to better market its presence, particularly to users of Sanderstead Library.
South Norwood	• That South Norwood Library is retained but the opportunity for redevelopment with the adjacent youth centre explored further. • That the Council explores opportunities to develop plans for an improved community facility jointly with the Samuel Coleridge Taylor youth centre. • The community and voluntary groups are fully engaged to develop a viable model for the site masterplan and operation.
Thorton Heath	• That Thornton Health Library is retained and improved. • That investment is made in minor refurbishment to enable more intensive use of the building. • That the service prepares to create a warm welcome for users of Broad Green Library if the decision is taken to close it.

Recommendations for library closures

4.13   Following consultation, the proposed closures have been reassessed taking into account the extensive feedback received and exploring the data in greater detail. The conclusion of the evaluation is that four libraries should be closed and mitigations put in place as set out in the EQIA in Appendix D.

Findings and recommendations for Bradmore Green Library

4.14   After reviewing the feedback from consultation and examining background data in greater depth, it remains the recommendation to consider the closure of Bradmore Green Library:

- The overall performance of the library is poor with the lowest number of active users, although its unit costs appear to be comparatively low.

- The population in the catchment area is relatively small and overlaps with Coulsdon Library's catchment area (and to a small extent with Caterham Hill Library).

- The building is small, poorly located and is unsuitable for the full range of the library service offer.

- Coulsdon Library already serves residents in Bradmore Green Library's catchment area and would require a short bus journey for those not using a car.

- The closure of Bradmore Green Library would be a serious disappointment to its loyal and passionate users.

- The ability to reinvest its resources in longer opening hours at an improved Coulsdon Library would bring significant benefits for library users.

- There are transport challenges, particularly with longer term parking and for people with mobility challenges.

- There is a significant pocket of deprivation in the catchment area associated mainly with the Tollers Estate.

4.15   There are impacts on library users with mobility challenges and for young people, particularly those using the adjacent primary school. Mitigation would be required focusing on outreach:

- To the wider school community in Old Coulsdon.

- To people who are deprived and/or currently not taking advantage of the service, particularly on the Tollers Estate.

- To people with mobility challenges by offering accessible transport from Old Coulsdon to Coulsdon Library on a programmed basis.

4.16   The impacts and mitigations are described further in the EQIA at Appendix D.

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Recommendations

1. **That Bradmore Green Library is closed to allow for the reinvestment of resources in Coulsdon Library and in library outreach in Old Coulsdon, focusing particularly on the Tollers Estate.**

2. **That the mitigations summarised above and in the EQIA be implemented.**

3. **That further engagement and research is undertaken into travel issues, including the design of an accessible transport provision to Coulsdon Library, more disabled parking bays and levels and perceptions of crime in the area.**

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Findings and recommendations for Broad Green Library

4.17   After reviewing the feedback from consultation and examining background data in greater depth, it remains the recommendation to consider the closure of Broad Green Library:

-   The overall performance of the library is comparatively low, reflecting its opening hours and its poor location. The active users of the library represent just 1.5% of the catchment area population.

-   Although its catchment area has a large population and LSOAs with high relative deprivation, its catchment area is largely also within the catchment areas of Central, Thornton Heath and Norbury libraries.

-   Although the library itself is on a road with poor public transport access, the catchment area is served by bus routes.

4.18   There are impacts on library users with mobility challenges and for young people, particularly those using the adjacent primary school. There are also minority communities, particularly the Tamil community, whose activities would be impacted. Mitigation would be required focusing on outreach including:

-   To the wider school community in the area and other community facilities.

-   Support for the local Tamil community and community group to make use of Thornton Heath Library as a new community base.

-   A programme of transport to enable attendees at Tamil community group activities to make use of Thornton Heath Library.

4.19   The impacts and mitigations are described further in the EQIA at Appendix D.

Recommendations

> 1. **That Broad Green Library is closed to allow for the reinvestment of resources in neighbouring libraries and in library outreach in the Broad Green area.**
>
> 2. **That the mitigations summarised above and in the EQIA be implemented.**
>
> 3. **That further engagement and research is undertaken into travel issues, including the design of a transport provision to Thornton Heath Library, more disabled parking bays and levels and perceptions of crime in the area.**
>
> 4. **That engagement takes place with Tamil community groups to help ensure their activities can be continued in new locations.**

Findings and recommendations for Sanderstead Library

4.20   Given its small size, its location and the relatively low level of need and the fact that many residents are in the wider catchment areas of Selsdon and other libraries, it is recommended that Sanderstead Library is considered for closure:

- Despite the relatively high level of issues of books and materials key aspects of service performance are poor.

- The population in the catchment area is among the least deprived in England.

- The library is a small building in a location that does not benefit from busy footfall.

- Much of the catchment area for the library is within the 1-mile catchment area for Selsdon library and within a 1.25-mile catchment area for both Purley and Selsdon libraries.

- A successful alternative library (Selsdon) is within reach for many and accessible transport would be provided to support those that would otherwise find it hard to visit Selsdon and Purley libraries.

- The freeing up of resources would enable the service to provide outreach support and collections in community venues and reach those not currently using the service, including children, young people and older residents.

- The library is well-supported by the local community and there may the potential for keeping the building in use as a community asset.

> **Recommendations**
>
> 1. **That Sanderstead Library building is considered for closure.**
> 2. **That the Council explores the level of community interest in retaining the building.**

Findings and recommendations for Shirley Library

4.21 Given its small size, its building and its poor performance and high unit costs, it is recommended that Shirley Library is closed:

- Shirley Library's comparative performance and unit costs are poor and usage was comparatively low even when the library was open full-time.

- Shirley Library's catchment area overlaps with Ashburton Library's (and West Wickham Library's).

- Ashburton Library has the capacity, particularly when open for more days, to provide a full service offer to users of Shirley Library.

- Mitigation is planned which will provide transport access for those who find it difficult to reach Ashburton Library and outreach at community locations.

- The catchment area has several areas which are among the most deprived in England that will need particular attention and support.

- Discussions would be needed with Bromley Council before the new West Wickham Library was actively marketed as an option for Croydon residents.

4.22 The impacts and mitigations are described further in the EQIA at Appendix D.

Recommendations

1. **That Shirley Library is closed to allow for the reinvestment of resources in neighbouring libraries and in library outreach in the Shirley area.**

2. **That the mitigations summarised above and in the EQIA be implemented.**

3. **That Bromley Council be consulted over the potential for Croydon residents to use West Wickham Library.**

The service needs improvement

4.23   Although the majority of respondents to the consultation opposed library closures, there was a general consensus that the current service provision isn't working well or providing residents with the offer that they want to see and improvements are needed. Its important to note that many respondents across the borough expressed appreciation and recognition for the work that library staff do and felt that the failings of the service were not their fault.

4.24   In this section we will consider the key points made during the consultation in regard to improving the service and make recommendations as to how the library service could respond to this feedback.

Table A4.4: key points raised on improving the service

- **The 2022 reduction in opening hours was disastrous**: the impact on usage has severely limited access for a wide range of groups, particularly for disadvantaged people.
- **The opening hours need to be extended**: the opening hours and the lack of evening and weekend opening is a barrier for many.
- **The most popular library services should be improved**: borrowing books, children's activities and cultural events remain the most popular services and participants wanted more. People also emphasised libraries as safe, quiet spaces for work and study for children and adults.
- **People are generally positive about self-service access**: there are mixed attitudes to using self-service access including a minority opposed, but most people are willing to try it if their concerns can be addressed.
- **Marketing and promotion need to be improved**: this has been a consistent theme in each round of consultation.
- **The internal fabric of library buildings need to be upgraded**: the fabric, spaces and furniture should be improved and cafés provided.
- **Longer opening is attractive to users of libraries that would benefit:** a weighted majority of survey respondent felt that extending opening hours would benefit them.
- **People were unsure about the definition of 'hubs' in the proposals and sceptical about how outreach could work:** some queried how hubs would work; some welcomed the model; and others suggested additional ideas.

Criticism of previous changes made

Main points of critique.

4.25   There is a strong feeling that the reduction in hours has prevented many people from using the service, especially working people and young people who most experience adverse effects of the limited weekend provision. More evening and weekend opening was requested by residents of all groups and across the borough in order to improve the service offer and reach more people.

4.26   It was also felt unfair that, having dramatically reduced opening hours with the consequence in reducing usage, the Council was now citing the low usage of libraries as a rationale to close them.

4.27 Although many respondents did not want to see an extension in opening hours at the cost of library closures, the proposition of longer hours alone was attractive to users at proposed Library Hubs and Community Hubs, especially at sites such as South Norwood and Purley which are currently only open two days a week but serve a large catchment area.

4.28 Croydon's libraries compare poorly to neighbouring services for the range of events and activities provided. Consultation respondents wanted to see more activities for children and families in particular and more arts and cultural events. Feedback was also received that physical book stock collections should be improved to make it easier to find books in Croydon without needing to reserve them from elsewhere.

4.29 The library environments are important for study and work space. People feel welcomed by staff and emphasised the importance of open access and facilities such as toilets.

4.30 However there was a strong feeling that more money should be spent on libraries and the buildings had experienced long periods of neglect. Local groups made specific suggestions to improve in the library buildings including constructing an accessible annexe to extent Sanderstead Library and install an accessible toilet and marketing of the library café space at Norbury Library. Community Infrastructure Levy funding was proposed as an option for funding capital works.

4.31 Many respondents were open to using self-service access in the libraries, and for this provision being extended, although a minority of users were opposed. Some respondents expressed concern about the security of visiting the library without staff and users felt it important that toilet facilities were available. Norbury and Selsdon library users, where self-service access is already available, were more positive about the offer though usage during self-service hours remains a low proportion of overall. Some users also raised concerns about the limited access to the library for unaccompanied children during self service hours and it was flet important that Saturdays were open with staffing to enable children to benefit from the library in this time.

4.32 We received feedback from residents across the borough that the reduction in hours has caused confusion and people don't know when the libraries are open or closed. External signage is outdated and it was flet that events and services are not well publicised. There was a suggestion that more could be done to promote the service through local groups including residents associations.

4.33 There was a perception from some respondents in the consultation that developing New Addington, Purley and South Norwood into Community Hubs would be a downgrade of the library offer and that space would be taken away from library services. There was also some confusion over the terminology as library users across the network flet that their libraries already were community hubs.

4.34 Respondents also communicated that there are already existing community hubs operated by community groups and organisations and the council should be seeking to work to support existing groups rather than create new ones.

4.35   Some residents were also concerned about the possible relocation of Community Hub libraries and the loss of valued local buildings.

4.36   It is no doubt the case that the reduction in opening hours has had a significant impact on library usage. Whilst it is difficult to track the impact fully as the service was still recovering from the impact of closures during the pandemic when the reduced hours were introduced, comparisons with the recovery rate of other library services using CIPFA benchmarking data tells Croydon's performance has been hit by the move to part-time opening.

4.37   Visits and loans of items have increased over the past year indicating loyal users have adapted to the new opening hours. However, this remains a low base and a slow rate of growth. It is understandable that people feel let down that the limited hours prevents them from using the library more and an increase in opening hours is essential to enabling more residents the opportunity to access the service.

4.38   Even with limited opening hours, each library continues to deliver regular events and host groups for activities. However for many sites, being open for activities on two days a week only severely limits the offer for residents. The nature of the staffing model also makes it more challenging to develop and promote events at each library as staff may not be at the same site more than once a week. The limited Saturday opening also prevents a full range of activities for families and school aged children

4.39   The library stock collections benefit greatly from membership of The Libraries Consortium and the access that provides for Croydon residents to access books from across 23 different library services. However, stock held within the borough is not refreshed as often as previously, and with stock purchasing undertaken by staff who also have a wider remit for buildings, marketing and programming, there is limited capacity to develop the collections and respond to trends in demand.

4.40   The library buildings are well loved and felt to be local landmarks, especially Shirley, Purley and Sanderstead which have historic features. The universal access and warm welcome is valued by residents and space for study and work is in demand.

4.41   That said many of the libraries have limited space for events and quiet study and most sites require investment to improve the interiors and facilities including access to plug sockets, comfortable seating and desk space as well as accessible toilets.

4.42   It is apparent from the condition of the library buildings that there has been underinvestment in refurbishment and modernisation over the years, which was compounded by the period of time when the libraries were outsourced to a third party to manage. Libraries which have undergone modernisation such as Thornton Heath, Norbury and Selsdon have yielded the benefits. However, as larger buildings, investment in these sites has also enabled more flexible use of the space which can help to generate income and diversify the library offer. Given the Council's financial position, any capital investment made on the libraries estate will need to have a strong rationale to demonstrate it can enable increased usage of the site, meet local need and demand and enable development of a wider library service offer.

4.43   The refurbishment at Norbury café created space for a café operation although an operator was not found in the initial marketing phase. There is an opportunity to develop a plan to reactivate this space, and the community hall, working with local groups to broaden the offer and impact of the library.

4.44   Self service access (Open+) usage is slowly increasing at Norbury and Selsdon Libraries and users of the offer like the additional access it provides. There is learning to take forward from the initial roll out of these sites including drawing more on library staff in the initial phases to promote the self service access provision, and building staff confidence to register new members for that offer. Extending the provision to other sites could strengthen the service and further extend opening hours but local engagement is needed with library staff, users and residents to ensure the provision meets need and addresses any concerns about security and access to toilets.

4.45   External signage often has obsolete opening hours displayed and only temporary fixes have been introduced since the reduction to display the new hours. The current staff model has no dedicated staff resource for marketing and service promotion, leaving limited capacity for marketing alongside stock management, programming and volunteer oversight. Wider council budget reductions mean there are no regular print materials sent to residents and limited budget within the libraries for printing and publicity. Effective marketing of services can be impactful but requires dedicated resource and skill to undertake. During the consultation potential community engagement and promotion opportunities emerged including more effective communication with residents associations but this can also take dedicated time to maintain contacts and prepare material to disseminate.

4.46   The concept of Community Hubs was misunderstood during the consultation and consideration should be given to the use of this terminology going forward. Potential opportunities for co-location and closer partnership working emerged for South Norwood, Purley and New Addington during the consultation but it is important that the library offer continues to be an anchor service in these sites and capacity is created to develop provision alongside existing local networks and social infrastructure, not developed in isolation. Further engagement with local partners is needed to develop this aspect of the service.

4.47   While some users of libraries proposed for closure were sceptical or cynical about the proposed outreach mitigations, this concept was welcomed by some respondents, especially closer working with schools and care homes and the opportunity to increase library service engagement in areas of deprivation. More work is needed to develop this model using feedback and local suggestions during the consultation to identify the most appropriate venues.

Summary of recommendations.

4.48   That the library service should prioritise increasing opening hours and introducing more weekend opening needs to be a priority to reach more people.

4.49   That dedicated resource is allocated for service development to achieve the full potential of the service and impact on investment including stock, marketing and events programmes.

4.50   That investment should be made in the library buildings to improve their functionality, flexibility and welcome based on an assessment of return on investment and opportunities to meet local need and develop a wider service offer.

4.51   That the opportunity to seek a café operator at Norbury Library should be pursued.

4.52   That extending self-service access is pursued, learning from weaknesses in the previous phase of implementation, working more closely with residents library users and community partners, and dedicating more staff time in the set up phase to promote the offer and register new users.

4.53   Development of the of the offer at New Addington, Purley and South Norwood needs to be done through partnership with local networks, residents and library users. More work is needed to develop the model and consider opportunities for the library service to support existing hubs across the borough through outreach

4.54   The library service should explore partnership with venues and partners proposed in the consultation feedback to pilot the outreach offer

Alternatives to closure should be found

4.55 During the consultation the library service also sought alternative suggestions from residents as to how the service could be improved. In this section we summarise the suggestions made and make recommendations to be considered for developing the service.

Table A4.5: key points raised on alternatives to closure

- **More money should be spent on libraries:** the Council's financial management should not get in the way of reversing budget cuts, particularly given Croydon's low relative spending on libraries.
- **Decisions on closures should be deferred**: time is needed to allow sufficient time to explore other financial options.
- **A better approach is needed to encouraging volunteering:** the Council's work to encourage volunteering was ineffective and other models should be explored.
- **More self-service opening would reduce staff costs**: this would be preferable to closures. However, it would be opposed by a minority of current users.
- **More income should be generated**: improving room hire and providing café would raise money.
- **There should be more collaboration with partners to reduce costs**: sharing buildings with partners would save resources.
- **Partners should be found to take over the buildings**: this would allow the service to continue on-site.
- **Community-managed models.** Several case studies from other libraries services were cited of successful community-managed libraries.

Review and assessment of each point.

4.56 Many residents felt that the choice between fewer libraries and a better service, or a limited service over thirteen buildings was invidious, and that more funding should be made available for libraries. Suggestions included increasing Council Tax with a ringfenced allocation for libraries and drawing on the Adult Social Care funding in light of the role libraries have in supporting good health and wellbeing in the community.

4.57 The Council continues to be in severe financial distress, most services are already reduced to essential operations only and there is little scope to reallocate core funding without significant adverse impact on other statutory services.

4.58 The background to the challenges that Croydon Council faces includes the standard set of issues unitary councils face – demand pressures, impact of pay and price increases and uncertainty about government funding – but also the unique set of pressures the council faces as a result of past financial management in the council including a debt burden of £1.4bn and annual costs of £62m to service it.

4.59 As outlined above, the Council agreed in February 2024 an increase in Council Tax of 2.99% for the financial year 2024-25, together with a 2% increase in the adult social care precept, in line with the cap that the government has set for all London

boroughs. This followed a decision in 2023 (with DLUHC's permission) for a council tax rise of 14.99% in 2023/24 without the need to hold a referendum.

4.60   The additional income raised was allocated to fund essential services and transformation programmes to enable the Council to operate in a more efficient way. Demand for services including adult social, homelessness prevention and special education needs support is increasing and even with these measures, the Council has to make substantial savings to if it is to achieve a balanced budget.

4.61   The Council's expenditure on libraries per 1000 population is already one of the lowest in London and no further savings are planned from the budget for the library service. However, there is little prospect of growth in the library service's budget since this would require savings from elsewhere in the Council. The bulk of the Council's spending is on other statutory services, such as children's and adult social care services, both of which are already under pressure to reduce spending.

4.62   Some residents also felt that the change in government in July 2024 may yield a more beneficial financial settlement for local government and libraries and that the council should delay any decision to explore this route.

4.63   It is not yet clear how the new Government plans to deal with the funding pressures on local government, with the Labour Government's first Budget due in October 2024. However, since taking office the new Chancellor of the Exchequer has reported a £22bn gap in public finances and introduced a series of spending cuts to address this, warning of more difficult decisions to come. There is no indication yet that improving the spending power of local government will be treated as a priority.

4.64   The use of volunteers within the library service was also criticised during the consultation as ineffective, identifying limited recruitment and restricted roles for volunteers to support the service. There were suggestions from many consultation respondents that they would be happy to volunteer their time to support library activity.

4.65   Whilst it is true that volunteer recruitment and development has been adversely impacted by a lack of capacity and resource within the library service to manage and support volunteers, research with other services which operate an integrated volunteer model suggests this would require a large pool to sustain a regular library service and it is unclear that this would be feasible or sustainable as a model in Croydon. Engagement with the VCFS in Croydon indicates that (according to recent research) regular volunteering to deliver customer facing services is at an all time low with more people instead looking for flexible and remote volunteering opportunities. In addition, the large number of individuals with either mental health or additional needs wanting to volunteer requires careful support, and the resources in place to integrate volunteers within a robust service delivery team. In this context relying on volunteers to replace a staffed service is unlikely to be sustainable.

4.66   Some respondents suggested extending the use of self-service access to libraries proposed to close as a way of maintaining the service there with less staff. However, self-service access alone also does not enable universal access or the full library

service offer, and under 16's would not be able to access the library unaccompanied. The relatively low use of self service at Norbury and Selsdon libraries when compared to the staffed hours suggests a clear preference for access with library staff. Although the majority of survey respondents were open to using self-service access in the future if their concerns could be addressed, respondents to the consultation overall also wanted to see more events and activities which wouldn't be available with self service access provision alone.

4.67   Many respondents suggested hiring out space in the library to subsidise operations. The library service has already sought to do this as part of the current model but as there is very little flexible space in the current building configurations across the network the market potential is limited. Given the limited facilities available for hire and the 'cost of sale' in marketing it, there is no indication that this would generate sufficient income to support service development and improvement. However, opportunities should be sought where available – for example in marketing the Norbury café and hall and in undertaking capital investment to create spaces which are more suitable for hire.

4.68   The proposed service model sought to identify opportunities to co-locate a library offer alongside other services to improve the sustainability and develop the offer for residents. The proposals focussed on New Addington, Purley and South Norwood as the most viable opportunities due to the size and location of the buildings, the size of the local catchment area and the opportunity to develop the library service offer. During the consultation the library service also sought to identify any partnership opportunities for the other libraries.

4.69   Opportunities have been identified with CALAT, the Council's Youth Service and Family Hub team at South Norwood and with CALAT and MIND Croydon in Purley which the library service should explore. No further interest was identified for co-location opportunities in the other libraries.

4.70   Limited interest was received from VCFS organisations interested in taking over library buildings which are no longer operated by the service at the end of this process. No expressions of interest were received from groups seeking to operate a community managed library but there is an opportunity for the library service to work with VCFS partners who may be able to take on a building and develop an outreach library service offer from the site.

Summary of recommendations.

4.71   That a new, limited volunteering offer to strengthen the library programme and support outreach activity should be designed with VCFS partners to ensure there is sufficient resource available to support volunteers.

4.72   That an investment plan for the retained libraries estate should be delivered to generate new income from hireable spaces.

4.73 That the service continues to develop opportunities to work with partners to deliver programmes and services in libraries, extending the offer, reaching new audiences and improving the sustainability of the service.

4.74 That a process to seek alternative community management of buildings no longer used by the library service should be developed, with the library service working closely with any new operators to provide an outreach library service from the site.

4.75 The service should work with the Community Managed Libraries Network to support any local groups who want to develop a proposal to take on a site as a community library.

Criticism of consultation methodology

4.76 There were also comments made that were critical about the consultation, either criticising the process or the clarity of the proposals. Although the number of such comments was not high, they provide an important challenge to the quality of the process and the feedback that it provided. These are summarised in the table below and will also be examined later in this section. There were a small number of comments praising the approach to consultation and we will also examine them.

Table A4.6: summary of criticism of the consultation process
• Not enough warning was provided of meetings.   • There was an over-reliance on digital methods.   • Not enough effort was made to publicise the consultation process.   • The survey questions were biased.   • There was insufficient consultation with schools.   • The definitions and rationales were unclear.

Not enough warning was provided of meetings

4.77 Cabinet consented for consultation to commence on the proposals at the meeting on 31st January 2024. Given the complexity of the proposals and the research involved, the library service then sought to commence consultation with a webinar to present the proposals and answer any initial questions. This was held on 7th February (promoted from 2nd February) followed by a series of public meetings between 15th and 20th February. This was a relatively short timescale for publicity, driven by a priority to enable meaningful consultation activity to commence as soon as possible. All of the initial events were well attended. Events later in the consultation did have a longer run in for promotion and most events were well attended.

Over-reliance on digital methods

4.78 The Council no longer produces regular print materials for mass distribution. However, printed material was available in libraries and partners were asked to help disseminate information. The libraries team were informed that several residents

associations had distributed to their networks and local residents had also been active in sharing information locally. The Council also sought to reach people digitally excluded through outreach and events in non-library spaces. A dedicated telephone number was provided so those who could not visit a library would be able to receive a survey posted to their home.

4.79   The consultation programme of events was developed dynamically involving key stakeholder contacts – starting with re-contacting the core stakeholder group from the previous consultation and sending out meeting updates to those who communicated by email. A database of contacts was developed from meetings in person and online for further marketing of events, as well as advertised online, and through posters in all libraries. From insights gained during the first round of meetings about reaching more groups who would be affected by the proposals, follow-up activities were planned and publicised. For the libraries proposed to close, meetings were held during the mornings, in the afternoons after school, and public meetings in the evening, as well as meeting individual stakeholders.

Insufficient contact with schools

4.80   A small number of participants complained that insufficient consultation had been carried out with schools. However, all schools were contacted by email, and sent info on the consultation through the heads' newsletter. The Council reached out to schools local to libraries proposed to close and held a visit at Coulsdon CofE to talk to children there about the library and their views.

Survey design

4.81   A handful of people complained about the survey design. The most common complaint was that free text boxes were restricted in character length preventing participants from leaving responses in sufficient detail. However, survey respondents were clearly invited to use the additional consultation email address to submit more length responses. Freetext survey boxes are generally restricted in length in order to facilitate data analysis.

4.82   A handful of people complained that the structure of question 14 was biased: Question 14 asked 'The six proposed library hubs would be open 5 to 6 days a week, with the majority of hours staffed, and extended hours with self-service access. What difference would this make to your ability to use the library more often?'

4.83   Complainants via the consultation email objected that the options given, 'it will make no difference to me', 'it will make it a bit easier', 'it will make it much easier' excluded options on a balanced scale similar to previous questions which would have allowed them to say it would make visiting the library more difficult (through the closure of the library they currently use).

4.84   This survey question was focused on assessing the potential impact on using the 9 libraries where opening hours were proposed to be extended. 'It will make no difference' has been assumed to be a negative response in that context. While the

question wording could have been clearer that it referred to using the 9 libraries where hours were proposed to be extended, the data have not been used to minimise opposition to closures. These objections were clearly measured through responses to the four parts of Q12 and specifically Q10 in relation to whether users of libraries proposed for closure would be able to use another library.

Consultation definitions and rationales

4.85   A large number of participants, through all channels, registered lack of understanding, scepticism or cynicism about some of the definitions and rationales used in the consultation. The primary definition which was questioned was the use of the term 'hub' in different contexts to categorise six libraries as 'library hubs' and three libraries as 'community hubs'. Many participants were confused about these labels and the model of service each implied, and their use alongside existing 'hub' models like 'family hubs'.

4.86   The 'library hub' and 'community 'hub' labels were developed to distinguish between those six libraries where it was intended the library service would be leading a multi-service facility in the current sites and the three 'community hub' sites where it was envisaged the facility might be operated by another service or provider, potentially at a new site, though the library offer across the nine would be of comparable scale and scope.

4.87   As the 'community hub' model was at an early stage of development it became clear during the consultation that the distinction, particularly from the perspective of a library user was not the most helpful. In future all nine sites will be designated as 'libraries'.

4.88   Criticism about the rationale behind the proposals focused on how usage figures had been deployed to determine that the performance at the four libraries proposed for closure was poor and the equalities impact data in relation to these communities. The use and interpretation of this data and the latest EQIA is dealt with in Appendix C (Review of closure proposals).

4.89   It was also pointed out that site profile documents were issued with different datasets. The Library Profile document was collated to provide a snapshot of each library including site assessment details, current usage and operating cost. They also contained some charts outlining historic data on loans and visits. Three site profiles were populated in error with historic New Members data instead of loans (Purley, Shirley and Thornton Heath). A revised document with the historic data for loans and visits was updated to the site towards the end of the consultation for clarity, but this historic loans data was not used a key metric to inform the proposals and as such we do not consider it a prerequisite for respondents to be able to make an informed decision and response to the proposals.

Equalities impact assessment

Principal impacts

4.90 The library service undertook a general equality impact assessment (EQIA) of the proposals in January 2024 ahead of public consultation. This general analysis has been reviewed and updated following analysis of the consultation responses alongside in-depth consideration of the proposals for four geographic areas in the borough:

- North Area: including Broad Green, Norbury, South Norwood and Thornton Heath

- Central Area: including Ashburton, Central, New Addington and Shirley

- South Area (1): including Purley, Selsdon and Sanderstead

- South Area (2): including Coulsdon and Old Cousldon

4.91 The EQIA considered the following data:

- Data on library users

- Responses from the public consultation from library users

- Demographic data (Local Lower Super Output Area – LSOA) on the local community around each library

- Demographic data on the Croydon borough overall

4.92 During the consultation we received feedback from respondents on the main groups likely to be impacted by the changes. These are summarised in the table below:

Demographic	Impact
Age: Older people	Library closures can cause a greater risk of isolation and digital exclusion for older people living in those areas. Older people represent a significant proportion of the population in Sanderstead, Shirley and Bradmore Green. Extending the opening hours in the other libraries can support older people in those more densely populated areas to access services. Older people are more likely to also have mobility disabilities, vision or hearing impairments or other health issues, limiting their travel.
Age: Children and young people	Library closures can limit access to services for children and young people living in those areas to be able to use

	services with a consequential impact on literacy, reading and wellbeing. Extending the opening hours in the other libraries can support children and young people in those more densely populated areas to use the services and provides the opportunity to host more activities for young people including. Closer partnership working with Family Hubs at South Norwood and Thornton Heath libraries will better serve families and young people with a cohesive offer. Delivering an outreach service can serve schools and education settings with book collections for use.
People with disabilities	Library closures can limit opportunities for people with disabilities who live in those areas to access the service. Extending the library service offer and opening hours in the other sites can support people living with disabilities in those areas to visit the service more. An outreach service could reach people with disabilities with a library service offer at a different local venue.
Race	The closure of Broad Green library in particular would impact Black and Asian communities disproportionately within the local community. Users of this library reported the highest rate of not being able to access alternative libraries and people who speak English as an additional language are a key user group currently which could lose access to local support and provision. The closure of Bradmore Green and Sanderstead libraries would disproportionately impact White communities who use the services more. The development of the outreach service can enable the library service to better reach communities under-represented in the current offer, including the Black community who are under represented in usage at Broad Green and Bradmore Green Libraries.
People experiencing deprivation (although not a protected characteristic this was raised as a concern in the consultation that library closures could exacerbate	The closure of a library could make it harder for people on low incomes or experiencing deprivation to access free services for reading, information and digital access. People on low incomes are less likely to be able to travel to their next nearest library and may be at higher risk of digital exclusion.

inequalities related to income and deprivation)	The development of the outreach service can enable the library service to better reach communities unable to travel to a library building by providing access to a library offer in another local venue close to areas of deprivation.

4.93   The review and consultation process also identified deficiencies in the current model of meeting local need, particularly in regards to working age people who struggle access library services during the limited opening hours; children, young people and families for whom the limited Saturday opening prevents access and certain ethnic communities who are under-represented compared to local area populations.

Summary of EQIA.

4.94   The net impact of the proposals is mixed with a potential negative impact experienced by users of the four libraries proposed to close and a potential positive impact for users of libraries where the offer is proposed to be extended.

4.95   It is anticipated that the outreach service will also enable the library service to better meet need at a local level by engaging nonusers with a library offer in different community settings, for example in community centres within the Tollers and Shrublands estates, which are in closer proximity to people on low incomes.

4.96   The impact of closure of a library building for those who use it cannot be understated. However, given the current low usage it is felt that many more residents could experience a positive impact through the proposals.

4.97   55% of survey respondents who primarily use a library proposed to close reported that they would be able to use another library. However, it is important that there are robust mitigations in place to ensure those who aren't able to visit a library building can still access the library offer.

4.98   The detailed EQIA documentation including local variations and specific local mitigations can be found in Appendices Di-Dv – Equality Impact Analyses.

Key mitigations needed.

4.99   The following mitigations have been designed to address the negative impact of library closures and to support the sustainable improvement of the library service offer in Croydon:

- Ongoing engagement with local community networks and library users to develop the library offer and the local outreach offer in 4 areas where libraries are proposed to close, following decision on the model.

    Depending on the library and local community this could include:

    - Children & families who attend regular library events

- Schools, nurseries, children's centres and other local groups that cater for parents and babies

- Health & wellbeing organisations

- Voluntary, Community & Faith groups attended by both women and men, especially to engage with those who do not use the library service

- Local Community Partnerships network engagement

- Develop library forums of local residents and community partners to act as a reference group and inform future development and improvement of the library service from April 25

- An extension of opening hours and increase in activity provision in nine Croydon Libraries. Croydon residents can also access out of borough library services including through membership of The Libraries Consortium.

- The library service will arrange a weekly bus shuttle to collect residents with access needs from a closed library to travel to the next nearest Croydon Library ensuring residents unable to travel independently can continue to visit a library.

- Home Library Service provision (free of charge) is available, especially to older residents or those with a disability, who cannot travel to another location and would like a regular delivery of books to their home. The service is available to anyone of any age who cannot visit their local library.

- Free 24/7 digital library of 60,000 ebooks/eaudiobooks, online magazines, newspapers and online reference resources

- Establish library outreach activities for all ages in local venues, to be launched at the same time as the library building closes, a key element of the overall library review proposals, not just as mitigations for closures but in order to reach a wider community with library services. The outreach offer will include a community book collection and outreach activities that align with the offer at the local venue.

- The library service will pilot regular outreach activity in communities impacted by closures during the transitional phase between Nov and March with a full schedule launched in April

- We will also work with local schools to provide an offer for them to access books in the school and to visit other Croydon Libraries.

- The Council will seek alternative operators within the VCFS for any buildings no longer managed by the library service using a Community Asset Transfer process. Should viable options be forthcoming, the library service will seek to work with any new operators to offer outreach activities from the site.

Conclusions

Summary of recommendations.

4.100 That the library service develop the mitigations outlined above as a priority once a decision is made on the new model and establish local community engagement plans to involve those groups most at risk of negative impact in designing the new service model.

5. Final recommended new model and vision for the service

Preamble

5.1   In this section we will outline the recommended model for the Council to adopt for its library service, highlighting the key changes needed to deliver the Council's ambitions for the service to become more impactful and effective.

5.2   The proposals take into account the findings from the consultation alongside the analysis of key datasets including library usage, population demographics, deprivation and need. The model is designed to deliver a sustainable service which can meet current need and provide the flexibility to evolve and respond to Croydon's growing population into the future.

New vision for the service

5.3   The first phases of the review identified the following outcomes which the new service model should be designed to deliver:

Table 5.1: strategic outcome and proposed deliverables from review

Strategic outcomes[14]	Proposed Deliverables
1. We are reaching more people: • More people are using our library service. • We reach the people who need us most in Croydon. • People know what we're offering.	• A network of modernised library buildings will be open for five days a week, including some evening provision and every library open on Saturdays. • A community-based outreach offer will be available to provide access to information, support and library services in areas without a local library building and deliver a localised offer responsive to need. • A community outreach and marketing programme will ensure the library offer is better communicated and understood by residents.

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[14] The primary outcomes are shown in bold, supporting outcomes are shown as bullet points beneath each primary outcomes.

Strategic outcomes[14]	Proposed Deliverables
2. We have improved our service to the public: • We have a wide range of activities on offer. • People enjoy what's available. • Our facilities are welcoming and attractive.	• We will invest in the retained library buildings to improve the facilities and develop space for hire and events to expand the offer. • We will establish a dedicated staff member to focus on partnerships and engagement, expanding the volunteering programme and bringing a broader range of services into the libraries for residents to access in one place. • We will establish regular resident engagement forums to stay connected to local need and priorities and involve residents in the library service development.
3. Our service is more efficient: • We are delivering better value within the resources we have • We generate more income from events and venue hire. • More people are willing to help.	• We will reallocate resources to where it will have the greatest impact. This includes releasing expenditure from the maintenance and repair of the smaller buildings to invest in library staff and services for residents. • We will increase income generation through creating spaces for hire in the libraries

5.4 Consultation activity did not explicitly seek feedback on the outcomes themselves but the responses received did enable us to ascertain the priorities of users from the library service.

5.5 Whilst a majority of respondents did not agree with the proposed model to achieving these outcomes, the consultation responses did largely align with the principles of the outcomes above. This included:

- A popular desire to extend opening hours and introducing Saturday opening.

- Widespread recognition that marketing and promotion for the service needs to improve.

- A desire for more events and a wider selection of book stock and services.

- A recognition that the service does not currently make good use of community networks and more could be done to reach people through partnerships with local groups and volunteers.

- The importance of considering how the service can better serve residents in areas of higher deprivation, people at risk of isolation and children, young people and families.

- The view that more income could be generated through hire of space. Whilst many respondents recognised the challenge inherent to the Council's financial distress, there was also a popular view that more funding overall should be made available for libraries from the Council to enable an extensive, quality offer to be delivered across the current 13 buildings.

5.6   Following this analysis, we have retained the three outcomes to inform the recommended new model for the service.

Final proposed recommendations

5.7   The initial model for the service which was proposed and consulted on between February and April 2024 is outlined above at Section 2.26 and in more detail in Section 6 of the Cabinet report for 25th September

5.8   The table below summarises the key pillars of the proposed model, what we heard in the consultation response and how the proposals have changed as a result.

Initial proposal	Key consultation findings	Revised proposal
Close four libraries (Broad Green, Bradmore Green, Sanderstead and Shirley) to enable investment in the remaining nine	Whilst investment in the buildings and extending opening hours was welcome, the majority of respondents objected to this being delivered by closing libraries. Respondents did want to see more events and activities, better promotion and more Saturday opening.	Although the majority opposed library closures, analysis of the alternative suggestions made to improve the offer does not indicate that they would be viable. Therefore in order to introduce further Saturday opening, a wider offer and improve the marketing and engagement of the service, we recommend closure of the four libraries proposed and reinvestment of those building costs into the service.
Remodel three libraries (Purley, New Addington and South Norwood) as Community Hubs, co-locating with other services and considering relocation of libraries. The delivery of this offer could include developing existing library	Some respondents were unclear about what a Community Hub might mean for their library and wanted to ensure library provision wasn't downgraded. Many people felt that the language of	All three sites will remain as libraries maintained by the Council and with a full service across the library Universal Offers including staffed Saturday opening.

buildings into Community Hubs, relocating a library service into a different building or exploring different models of delivering the library offer through partnership with other services or groups.	community hubs wasn't clear and is already used to mean too many different things. There was some support for co-locating services where there is a complementary link, for example adult learning and health. People felt passionate about the library buildings at South Norwood and Purley and wanted them to remain. Some people in New Addington felt that the library building was cut off from the wider community and more should be done to connect with other existing hubs in the area.	The service will seek strategic partnerships to develop the offer from each site including progressing work with the Council's adult education and family services. The three libraries will remain in their current location. Further engagement and consultation with local communities will be undertaken to develop the offer and ensure the service and buildings meet the needs of the local communities. Investment is recommended to proceed in the current South Norwood Library site, alongside the adjoining Samuel Coleridge Taylor Youth Centre. The offer in New Addington will be developed through engagement with other local networks and centres proposed during the consultation
Develop an outreach service to provide access to library services in other community venues.	Respondents weren't sure what this would look like and where it would be. There were concerns about libraries being replaced with a just a shelf of books. A number of partnership opportunities arose through engagement with other community services which are reaching local people in priority areas and were interested in hosting a library service offer.	The outreach service is recommended to be developed further, providing clarity on locations and the nature of the offer at each site. The vision for the service and the offer available is proposed to be piloted in Autumn 2024 as outlined below.
Develop the online digital offer	Users of the service were generally positive though there were UK wide issues with the app during the consultation	The Council will continue to invest in digital stock and online services through membership of The Libraries Consortium and will

	period (now resolved) which generated criticism from some users.	develop the digital skills programme across the retained libraries and community outreach venues through partnership with the VCFS.
Review the use of self-service access ahead of extending further	The consultation responses indicated mixed feelings regarding self-service access though a large proportion of respondents were open to trying it and users at Norbury and Selsdon where its already in place were more positive	We recommend installing self-service access at Thornton Heath Library and as part of wider refurbishment works at South Norwood and Coulsdon Library, working closely with local users and communities to develop and promote the service.
Seek alternative community use for any buildings no longer used by the library service to remain for community benefit	There was some interest from the voluntary, community and faith sector to take on library buildings for alternative community use but concern regarding the viability and condition of the buildings and the capacity of community groups to take on the full operating costs.	Council's Community Asset Transfer is recommended to be deployed to enable any buildings no longer managed by the library service to be retained for alternative community benefit. A fund for capital works is proposed to enable any sites to achieve the required EPC rating to allow for lettings, and a grant of up to £20k will be available to support organisations to take on the operating costs for the sites over a two year period.

Summary of recommendations

5.9   That the new service model is adopted to consist of:

- Nine libraries, managed and delivered by the Council consisting of: Central, Ashburton, New Addington, South Norwood, Norbury, Thornton Heath, Coulsdon, Selsdon and Purley. Each of the three geographic areas (North, Central and South) will have three libraries.

- Self-service access will be extended at Norbury and Selsdon to include evening opening and introduced at Thornton Heath, South Norwood and Coulsdon to extend opening at those sites, alongside staffed days.

- An outreach service including a network of library link touch points in other community venues. These sites would provide access to a community book collection and host a weekly session of library events tailored to the local

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community and with synergies to the venue and wider offer. This service will also provide library access through settings including care homes, sheltered accommodation settings and schools.

- A digital service including the 24-hour online service offering an extensive collection of stock and materials, learning and reference help and a programme of digital skills support sessions delivered in the libraries and community venues.

5.10 It is estimated that the implementation may take up to six months. During this time an interim arrangement will be in place which enables the service to transition to the new model efficiently and to start delivering against the new service outcomes. The tables below outline the current and transitional opening hours until the new model of nine libraries open five to six days a week is implemented from April 2025..

Current Timetable – September 2024

	Central Hub				North Hub				South Hub				
	Ashburton	Central	New Addington	Shirley	Broad Green	Norbury	South Norwood	Thornton Heath	Bradmore Green	Coulsdon	Purley	Sanderstead	Selsdon
Monday	10-6	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6
Tuesday	10-6	10-6	Closed	Closed	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	8-6
Wednesday	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	Closed	Closed	10-6	10-6
Thursday	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	Closed	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	8-6
Friday	10-6	10-6	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	8-6
Saturday	9-5	9-5	Closed	Closed	Closed	9-5	Closed	9-5	Closed	9-5	Closed	Closed	9-5

Interim timetable – November-December 2024

	Central Hub			North Hub			South Hub		
	Ashburton	Central	New Addington	Norbury	South Norwood	Thornton Heath	Coulsdon	Purley	Selsdon
Monday	10-6	10-6	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6
Tuesday	10-6	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	Closed	10-6	8-6
Wednesday	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	10-6	Closed	Closed	10-6
Thursday	10-6	Closed	10-6	10-6	Closed	Closed	10-6	10-6	8-6
Friday	10-6	10-6	10-6	10-6	10-6	Closed	Closed	Closed	8-6
Saturday	9-5	9-5	Closed	9-5	Closed	9-5	9-5	Closed	9-5

Interim timetable – January-March 2025

	Central Hub			North Hub			South Hub		
	Ashburton	Central	New Addington	Norbury	South Norwood	Thornton Heath	Coulsdon	Purley	Selsdon
Monday	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Open+ 9-7	Closed	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6
Tuesday	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Open+ 9-7
Wednesday	Closed	Staff 10-6	Open* 10-6	Open+ 9-7	Closed	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6
Thursday	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Open+ 9-7
Friday	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6	Closed	Staff 10-6
Saturday	Staff 9-5	Staff 9-5	Closed	Open+ 9-5	Closed	Staff 9-5	Staff 9-5	Closed	Staff 9-5

Rationale for the recommendations.

5.11 Although usage of the libraries has increased over the last year it remains at a very low base and the current staff capacity is not sufficient to deliver the improvements needed to widen the offer and meet need in the borough. Use of self-service access is also increasing but still represents a very small proportion of usage and doesn't provide universal access indicating that staffed hours are more effective in reaching people.

5.12 The financial position of the Council means that it is not possible to increase overall investment in the library services. The only way to generate sufficient additional funds to invest in extending the service is through closing buildings.

5.13 The alternative models suggested in the consultation do not appear likely to yield the additional income required or to be sustainable in the long term given the current pressures on volunteering.

5.14 This model enables the service to adopt a sustainable approach which can then support development in the long term. By retaining a smaller estate of buildings which are brought up to a good standard and made more flexible, the libraries will be better equipped to deliver against the four universal offers whilst also undertaking more targeted work through outreach into community settings. Adopting a sustainable core model now can safeguard against salami slicing in the future as the council continues to face financial pressure.

5.15 The model also responds to Croydon's population growth, investing in facilities and infrastructure in areas of higher development whilst creating the capacity to effectively engage new populations in the borough through outreach and marketing.

5.16 By designing the library service around the offer for residents and the best approach to reaching and impacting people with the service, rather than the fixed buildings alone, we can more effectively respond to changing need in the borough and partnership opportunities with the VCFS and local communities.

New vision for the service

5.17 We want to enable people who live, work or study in Croydon to benefit from a high quality library service which delivers opportunities for reading, learning, creating and connecting online and with others through each stage of life.

5.18 We will promote and enable reading for pleasure and learning through free and accessible collections of quality physical and digital materials, enthusiastic staff and volunteers, campaigns and events to inspire and equip children and adults on their reading journey.

5.19 We will act as local hubs for information and digital support services with knowledgeable staff and volunteers, access to digital devices and wi-fi, digital skills sessions and learning sessions.

5.20 We will support the health and wellbeing of residents through welcoming staff and volunteers, access to health information and events and partnerships with local

health and community services to support people to live longer, healthier lives through visiting their local library.

5.21   We will embed the legacy of Croydon's year as the London Borough of Culture by developing our libraries as creative hubs with space for events and exhibitions, artist residencies and programmes which celebrate the cultural diversity of our borough and create opportunities for people of all ages to participate in arts and culture activities.

5.22   Our libraries will be thriving centres within their communities with local teams working in partnership with local community networks and other council services to better meet local need and provide a gateway to wider services. Our outreach service will bring the library service into community centres, children's centres, care homes and faith centres to reach people where they are.

5.23   We will work closely with residents and local community partners to develop the service through collaboration and partnerships to meet local priorities.

Changes in the culture of the service

5.24   In order to deliver this vision for the service, a new model and way of working is needed. The current model of stretching limited financial and staffing resources across thirteen sites undermines the opportunity to build rich local partnerships, develop creative programmes and attract audiences, work with and support volunteers and make the libraries more available for local groups. Here we outline the key principles which the new model will adopt in a new way of working to improve the service.

Partnership working.

5.25   Dedicated staff resource will be created to support strategic partnership development whilst library staff at all levels will be open and proactive in recognising partnership opportunities and enabling residents and the VCFS to work with the library service on shared agendas.

Working with community organisations.

5.26   We recognise the strength of local knowledge and expertise that exists amongst local groups, and the brilliant achievements of Croydon's VCFS. We will ensure that the libraries are active in local networks and the design and development of library services responds to local priorities and existing networks.

Working with volunteers.

5.27   Volunteers will continue to have an important role in delivering the library programmes and services. The new model will create the capacity for volunteers to develop through the library service, focussing on what they want to achieve and supporting them through that journey. We will work with local partners in the VCFS to promote opportunities and support people to gain skills and wellbeing through volunteering with the library service.

Relationship with the public.

5.28   Key learning to be taken from the last change in service model is that the library service cannot undertake this change in isolation and without regular feedback and support from the community of users and local people who care about the service. Whilst the current model has no resourcing to enable this to happen, the new model creates capacity for local library teams, and the outreach service, to respond more effectively to feedback, ideas and opportunities from the public. A network of local library forums will be established to feed into the development of the library offer, address challenges and codesign solutions.

Conclusion

Recommendations re outcomes and vision/mission.

5.29   That the Council adopts the outcomes framework for the future library service :

- The core outcomes:

Outcome 1: We are reaching more people

Outcome2: We have improved our service to the whole community.

Outcome 3: Our service is more efficient

- The new service model consisting of nine libraries, an outreach service and a digital service.

- The new working culture and working practices as outlined above

6. Proposed operating and financial models

Preamble

6.1 This chapter outlines the proposed operational and financial model for the service to enable the Council to meet the core outcomes outlined above.

6.2 It is essential that the model is realistic in the capacity allocated to deliver what is needed, affordable and sustainable within the ongoing financial pressures faced by the Council.

Operating model

The new network and service.

Nine Libraries.

6.3 The Council will continue to manage and deliver library services from the following nine libraries:

Ashburton Library Shirley Road, Croydon, CR9 7AL
Central Library Katharine Street, Croydon, CR9 1ET
Coulsdon Library Brighton Road, Coulsdon, CR5 2NH
New Addington Library Central Parade, New Addington, CR0 0JD
Norbury Library Beatrice Avenue, London, SW16 4UW
Purley Library Banstead Road, Purley, CR8 3YH
Selsdon Library Addington Road, CR2 8LA
South Norwood Library Lawrence Road, South Norwood, SE25 5AA
Thornton Heath Library Brigstock Road, Thornton Heath, CR7 7JB

Outreach.

6.4 The library service will also deliver three forms of outreach services:

Home Library – a book delivery service for housebound members, care homes and some school settings

Community events – library service information and promotion at community events and festivals and in schools and settings

Library Links – a network of community book collections in local venues available alongside weekly drop in sessions of library events and activities.

6.5   A number of community partners for Library Links were suggested during the consultation and the library service is working with them to pilot activity in October-December ahead of launching a full programme in January 2025.

Digital

6.6   A digital offer including 24/7 online access to e-books, e-audio, e-magazines and newspapers as well as online learning and reference activities. A programme of digital skills and support sessions delivered in the libraries and through the outreach service.

Changes to the offer (inc opening hours).

6.7   The new model seeks to redistribute the existing staffed opening hours more effectively across the library network by maintaining fewer buildings which are open longer hours. During the implementation period there will be a small reduction in opening hours in the libraries while the staff work to decommission libraries which would no longer operate and recruit additional staff needed to extend the hours.

In the period prior to the opening hours being extended staff would mitigate the impacts of the closures through a weekly transport service for people with access needs to visit the next nearest library and delivery of an outreach service at venues close to any libraries which are closed. This work will be undertaken during the quietest period of library use to minimise disruption.

6.8   The table below outlines the change in opening hours.

Model	Total hours
Current	350
Nov-Dec	278
Jan-March	328
April onwards	392

Changes to communication.

6.9   During the implementation phase the library service will communicate updates and changes to the service via the webpages, social media channels and a regular newsletter as well as notices in libraries. New external signage will be installed outside each library site to communicate the new opening hours.

6.10 Print material communicating the new opening hours and offer will be created for the libraries and the outreach service and displayed in libraries and local community information points. The library webpages and social media channels will also promote events and services and a regular email newsletter will be reinstated to share news and events.

Changes to staffing.

6.11 A review will be undertaken of the current library service roles, locations and working patterns to meet the new culture and needs of the service.

6.12 A small number of additional posts will also be created to develop partnerships and deliver the outreach service, undertake fundraising and marketing of the service and extend the Saturday opening across nine sites. It is anticipated that these posts will be at grades 1 to 6 on the Council payscales.

Changes to volunteering.

6.13 A review will also be undertaken of the volunteering roles and working processes including recruitment, training and development. Engagement will be undertaken with existing volunteers to support them to continue volunteering with the library service.

6.14 Volunteers will support delivery of library events programmes and support with customer services delivered in the libraries and outreach service.

Changes to technology.

6.15 Self-service access will be extended as part of wider refurbishments at Coulsdon and South Norwood and to introduce the offer at Thornton Heath.

6.16 We will also explore device access programmes alongside community partners to support residents who are digitally excluded and do not have access to a personal device.

Financial model

Current budget.

6.17 The current operating budget for the service is £2.84m. This funds library staffing, buildings, digital infrastructure, soft facilities, transport and materials. Library stock materials are currently supported separately through Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) with £300k allocated per annum for three years (2022-2025).

6.18 The revised model is estimated to cost £2,939m. However the model also forecasts £38k in income from the library service and a contribution of £14k from CALAT, the Council's adult learning service for building costs in co-located libraries at New Addington, South Norwood and Purley.

6.19 The model also proposed reinvesting £49k of building costs from libraries proposed to close to support the new model.

6.20   Therefore the overall library service operating budget matches the current budget of £2.84m.

Capital and one-off costs of change.

6.21   The library service currently has a capital budget to undertake essential improvements including rewiring, installation of accessible toilets and improvements to heating, cooling and plant equipment. £2.12m is currently allocated in the capital programme with a further £0.2m allocated in 24/25 from the Shared Prosperity grant fund. By reducing the number of buildings retained by the libraries service we can ensure that this investment is targeted to locations of highest impact and reduce the need for further capital requests to improve the accessibility and condition of the full estate.

Funding sources.

6.22   The core funding for the service budget comes from the Council's general revenue funds in support of the statutory service delivery. Funding for the stock and reading materials is currently grant funded through a three year agreement from the CIL fund. A further application will be submitted for the next three year period.

6.23   The library service will also continue to bid for grant funding, building on recent success receiving £225k in project grants from Arts Council England in 22-24.

Conclusion

Summary of new service.

6.24   The new library service structure will provide staffing to deliver the operating timetable and service outcomes developed through the review. With sufficient staffing to cover scheduled opening hours, allowing for sickness and planned leave absences and a dedicated resource for strategic partnership development and fundraising, the new model will enable the service to function sustainably and deliver an improved offer for residents.

Summary of financial implications.

6.25   The proposed model will be funded cost neutrally to the Council through the budget outlined above. Budget monitoring will be undertaken on a monthly basis to ensure the service delivery remains on track.

7. Implementation plan (including further engagement)

Introduction

Purpose of chapter

7.1 In this chapter, we present a suggested implementation plan, with a work programme and description of the resources and governance arrangements required, to implement the recommended new model.

Importance of clarity about timescales and resources

7.2 Ahead of implementing the recommended new model, it is important to be clear, and manage expectations, about the likely timescales for introducing the changes and the organisational resources that will be required to support their introduction.

7.3 In the paragraphs below, we set out the suggested approach.

Summary of work programme

Priorities

7.4 The work programme consists of six key workstreams:

1. Transition to the new staff model.

2. Development of operating models for co-locating services with libraries

3. Development of the outreach offer.

4. Extension of Open+ and opening hours.

5. Decommissioning of libraries no longer operated by the service.

6. Transition of closed libraries to alternative management.

7.5 In the table below we set out a high level timetable for implementation.

Table A7.1: overview of the proposed implementation work programme

Workstreams	Key tasks	Month
1. Transition to the new staff model **Outputs:** *new staff model; fully trained staff; new timetables.*	• Review current staff roles and establishment. • Conduct staff consultation • Recruitment to new/revised staff roles. • Deliver staff training, personal development and culture shift methodology as required. • Commence new timetables with extended / revised opening hours.	• Sept '24 • Oct- Nov '24 • Nov-Jan '25 • Nov-Feb '25 • Jan-Apr '25
2. Development of partnerships at New Addington, Purley and South Norwood **Outputs:** *engaged partners; new operational plans; completed capital works; new community hub service offer.*	• Conduct partner engagement • Develop and introduce new building operational plans. • Scope capital investment requirements. • Commission and complete capital works. • Launch the new partnership offer.	• Aug-Oct '24 • Oct-Nov '24 • Oct-Nov '24 • Dec-Mar '25 • Apr '25
3. Development of the outreach offer **Outputs:** *pilot outreach venues; outreach delivery cohort(s) recruited; new outreach offer.*	• Scope and confirm the preferred venues and local outreach offer to pilot. • Conduct pilot outreach offer activity. • Recruit outreach delivery cohort(s). • Develop outreach programme schedule and offer. • Launch the new outreach programme offer.	• Aug-Sep '24 • Oct-Dec '24 • Nov-Jan '25 • Dec-Feb '25 • Mar-Apr '25
4. Extension of Open+ and opening hours **Outputs:** *library site assessments; provider contracts; completed capital works; Open+ hardware installations.*	• Conduct site assessments of retained libraries. • Scope capital investment requirements. • Negotiate and agree contracts with Open+ provider(s). • Commission and complete capital works. • Commence Open+/hardware installations	• Aug-Sep '24 • Oct- Nov '24 • Nov '24 • Nov-Feb '25 • Feb-Apr '25

Workstreams	Key tasks	Month
5. Decommissioning of libraries no longer operated by the service Outputs: *library site assessments; infrastructure transition plans for building decant(s); staffing timetables; decommissioned library building(s).*	• Conduct site assessments to establish decant requirements (eg digital). • Develop and implement transition plan for infrastructure decant as needed (eg furniture, stock). • Develop and implement interim staffing timetable(s) per library building. • Confirm any library building(s) that have ceased delivering Council services and are now 'decommissioned', with recommended next steps per building.	• Sep '24 • Sep-Oct '24 • Oct '24 • Nov-Dec '24
6. Transition of closed libraries to alternative management Outputs: *alternative management proposals from prospective partners; business cases; contractuals agreed with potential new operators; site reviews with recommendations for asset disposal(s).*	• Engagement process and building pack developed and launched with key information and promotion for potential bidders • Briefing presentations • Building tours • Assessment of proposals including engagement with local library friends groups • Confirmation of approved new operators and contracting process	• Oct-March 25
7. Communications and engagement	• Develop local stakeholder lists for each library catchment with reference to EQIA findings to inform service development • Maintain regular updates on library webpage and social media to communicate offer to residents and access • Display notices at libraries and community settings to inform residents how to access services • Send monthly newsletter updating on changes to the service • Work with local community partners to identify barriers to accessing services and address	• Sept 24 • From Oct 24

Description of each workstream, key tasks and outputs

1. Transition to the new staff model

7.6   It will be important to review the library service staff establishment's current roles and responsibilities against the new staff model and to identify any changes that may be required. Once the review has been completed, it may be necessary to conduct staff consultation in relation to any prospective changes to staffing levels, terms and conditions, and or working arrangements.

7.7   Following consultation, and the consideration of feedback and internal HR processes, any new, or revised, staffing posts in the new staff model will need to be recruited to.

7.8   Staff will also require training and/or personal development to adapt to the new model, including any 'soft' culture shift changes that may be required to adjust to the new ways of working.

7.9   Finally, any new staffing model will require a new staffing timetable, incorporating the revisions to opening hours. This will need to be embedded and resourced accordingly, especially during any early weeks, when teething problems may need to be addressed before new ways of working become embedded and staff feel confident following the changes.

2. Development of partnerships for New Addington, Purley and South Norwood

7.10   In developing the new partnerships to develop the service offer, it will be important to engage key partners who may be involved in the delivery of, or affected by, the changes.

7.11   Alongside the staffing timetable changes, new building operational plans may be required to set out the new ways of working.

7.12   The buildings delivering the partnership offer are likely to require physical fabric updates, so a scoping exercise will be required to identify the capital works that might be required, ahead of internal approvals, commissioning and completion of the works.

7.13   Upon completion, the new partnership offer can be launched to the public, aligning with the indicative completion date across all other implementation workstreams.

3. Development of the outreach offer

7.14   A scoping exercise will be required to identify the preferred delivery location, or venue, for the outreach offer pilot, before it is then marketed and delivered to the public.

7.15   Any delivery partners, and/or participants, required for the pilot will also need to be recruited.

7.16   Upon the pilot's completion, any lessons learned will need to be considered in order to inform the future outreach programme schedule and specifics of the future offer, aligning with the changes being introduced across each of the other implementation workstreams before the new offer is then launched to the public.

4. Extension of Open+ and opening hours

7.17   Site assessments of the retained library buildings will be required to assess their existing compatibility, and scope the capital works required, to introduce Open+ and any related supporting hardware infrastructure.

7.18   Contractuals will need be negotiated and finalised with the preferred Open+ provider(s), as well as the commissioning and completion of any required capitals works to support its implementation.

7.19   Upon completion of the works, and the successful embedding of Open+ following its installation at each affected library building site, the new offer can be rolled out to the public.

5. Decommissioning of libraries no longer operated by the service

7.20   Site assessments will be required of the buildings identified for no longer operating library services from in order to establish the decant requirements e.g. removing existing digital infrastructure or physical assets of value, such as furniture and stock.

7.21   Following the site assessments, a transition plan will need to be developed, and then completed, for conducting the infrastructure decant over a realistic time period.

7.22   An interim staffing timetable(s) per library building will also need to be developed and introduced, aligning with other staffing changes across the other implementation workstreams.

7.23   On successful decant, the library building(s) that have ceased delivering Council services and are now considered 'decommissioned' will be identified, and a set of recommended next steps will be prepared for the appropriate governance board's consideration.

6. Transition of closed libraries to alternative management

7.24   A set of criteria for assessing the viability of any alternative operations proposals received from the community for any decommissioned, or closed, library buildings will need to be developed and agreed.

7.25   In addition, the preferred process to be followed for disposal of any closed library building (eg community asset transfer) will need to be identified and agreed.

7.26   Following the development of these two key items, an open call opportunity to propose alternative management per closed building can be developed and issued inviting them to submit a formal proposal for consideration, informed by this, and any other, key supporting information that has been prepared.

7.27   Ahead of receiving the reviewing any proposals, the review panel membership will need to be agreed and recruited to. Once the panel is in place, all community responses, including future business cases and all related submission(s) materials, can be reviewed and assessed against the agreed alternative operations criteria.

7.28   Once any preferred proposals are identified, introductory discussions, leading to the negotiation and agreement of future contract terms with the prospective new operators of each closed library building(s) can be completed and a 'handover' completed.

7.29   For any closed library building sites without a viable alternative operation model, the process to be followed for disposal should be followed, with a set of recommended next steps to be prepared for the appropriate governance board's consideration.

Communications and engagement

7.30   Developing a communications plan and stakeholder map in each local area to ensure groups and residents are well informed on the library offer and how to access it.

7.31   Maintaining current information online and via posters and notices in community settings and libraries.

7.32   Engaging with local groups and networks to design the library offer and address any barriers to access identified in the EQIA.

Resourcing the work programme

Governance process.

7.33   The Libraries Review programme board, chaired by the Director for Culture and Community Safety will continue to meet monthly during the implementation phase to maintain oversight of delivery and address any risks to the timescale.

7.34   The Executive Mayor and the Cabinet lead for Culture and Communities will also receive a monthly update.

Key resources and responsibilities

7.35   The library service management team will lead on delivery of the implementation plan supported by a dedicated project manager. The communities team will lead on the engagement process to identify alternative uses for any buildings no longer operated by the library service.

7.36   Delivery will be supported by cross council services including assets, facilities management, capital delivery, recruitment, human resources and digital services.

Monitoring and reporting

Reporting process.

7.37   A progress report on implementing the new model will be brought to a Cabinet meeting in April 2025.

7.38   Following implementation, an annual report on the library service performance and impact against the outcomes will be published on the library service website.

Appendices

Finance context

7.39   The background to the challenges that LBC faces includes the standard set of issues unitary councils face – demand pressures, impact of pay and price increases and uncertainty about government funding – but also the unique set of pressures the council faces as a result of past financial management in the council.

7.40   Measures taken, prior to 2024/25, to address the unique financial challenges the council faced include:

- DLUHC permission for a council tax rise of 14.99% in 2023/24 without the need to hold a referendum (the national limit for unitary authorities was 4.99%, with the extra 10% increase generating £21m additional income in 2023/24 and on-going income in subsequent years).

- Capitalisation directions up to the end of 2023/24 of £391.6m which permit revenue spending to be charged to capital, with associated on-going debt servicing costs.

- Budget corrections (amounting to £49m in 2023/24) to address budget inaccuracies.

- Revenue budget savings of £45.7m in 2021/22, £55.1m in 2022/23 and £36.1m in 2023/24.

- A capital programme restricted to essential work on assets such as operational buildings, roads, parks and ICT infrastructure.

- Asset sales to generate capital receipts that could be used to reduce debt.

7.41   Corrections to the budget in 2023/24 resulted in spend and budget being aligned in 2023/24 with a break-even position forecast at Month 10 monitoring. This is a good basis for setting budgets for future years.

7.42   However, the breakeven position for 2023/24 was based on a budget which included revenue income generated through a £63.0m capitalisation directive for 2023/24, and this is reflected in on-going requirements for capitalisation directives to balance the budget for future years.

7.43   In addition, the full extent of the council's legacy financial issues are not yet established with no audited accounts since 2018/19 and no published (unaudited) accounts since 2020/21. Whilst this should not impact on the in-year budget position for future years, it may impact on legacy costs that need to be met.

Medium Term Financial Plan

7.44 These unique financial challenges provide the context in which the council's MTFP for 2024-28 (see Annex A) was developed. Key points in the MTFP are as follows:

7.45 <u>Gross budget requirement:</u>

- A high net cost of borrowing for the council in each year of the plan (£65.8m in 2024/25, rising in future years), reflecting both historic borrowing decisions and the impact of capitalisation directives on borrowing costs.

- Provision of £31.5m budget growth in each year from 2025/26 onwards (£19.5m for demand pressures – including the legacy budget and contingency – and £12.0m for pay and price increases).

- Revenue budget savings of £20.0m in each year from 2025/26, split between savings already identified as part of the 2024/25 budget process (£7.0m for 2025/26 and £5.0m for 2026/27) and those still to be identified (£13.0m in 2025/26, £15.0m in 2026/27 and £20.0m in 2027/28).

- Savings in borrowing costs from asset disposals of £6.7m in 2024/25 rising to £9.9m by 2026/27 (£200m disposals required over the period 2022/23 to 2025/26 of which £148m were forecast as being delivered before 31st March 2024 and the remaining £52m in 2024/25 and 2025/26).

7.46 <u>Resources:</u>

- All government grants rising by 1% in cash terms each year from 2025/26 onwards (including core grant and Revenue Support Grant).

- All business rate related income rising by 2% in cash terms each year from 2025/26 onwards (grant for under-indexing of business rates, business rates top-up grant, and retained business rates income).

- Council tax income rising by 2.99% each year from 2025/26 onwards (assuming addition of 2% each year for the adult social care precept won't apply from 2025/26 onwards).

- An on-going requirement for a capitalisation directive of £38.0m each year through to 2027/28.

Reasonableness of spending assumptions in the MTFP

7.47 There are questions that could be raised on the reasonableness of the spending assumptions in the budget, for example, the provision for £19.5m of demand/legacy growth in each year from 2024/25 onwards when £11.2m was required in 2024/25. However, the assumptions would have been tested through the council's own internal QA processes and were subject to public examination at Budget Scrutiny Committee. It is likely, given the recent financial history of the council, that the assumptions made in the MTFP were prudent. These assumptions will be revisited and amended throughout the year leading up to the setting of the 2025/26 budget.

Reasonableness of funding assumptions in the MTFP

7.48   There is also uncertainty about the resourcing assumptions. The biggest risk for the council in this respect is changes to the local government finance system. A rebasing of the way in which business rates are redistributed between councils together with an updated assessment of local authority need to spend has been planned for several years but has been postponed on several occasions. The council projections assume these will have no impact on the council and although that may be reasonable in terms of the rebasing of business rates (LBC's business rates base growth does not appear to have been out of line with the average since the baseline was set in 2013/14) it may not be the case with the Fair Funding Review where there is a possibility that resources could be moved away from London. Even if there were changes to the finance system, it is likely that there would be safety net arrangements which would limit the impact over the short term.

7.49   Leaving aside the impact of a possible change to the local government finance system, comments on the resource assumptions are as follows:

- Council tax accounts for around 55% of the council's funding requirement. The forecast assumes council tax increases of 2.99% per annum which is less than the permitted 4.99% increases in each of the past two years. 2.99% therefore appears to be a prudent assumption and it is possible that a future government may permit increases closer to those allowed in recent years.

- Business rates (including retained income and business rates top up grant), which account for another 18% of funding, come from the national business rates pool which can be expected to increase in line with inflation and therefore a 2% per annum increase seems reasonable (subject to no change in distribution arrangements).

- Core grant funding and Revenue Support Grant have been assumed to increase by 1% per annum in cash terms. I attach as Annex B to this note projections in the Office for Budget Responsibility report which came out alongside the Chancellor's March 2023 Budget which suggest that 'unprotected departments', such as DLUCH, could see spending reduced by an average of 2.3% to 3.6% per annum in real terms between 2025/26 and 2028/29, resulting in a cash cut of between 0.3% and 1.6% (assuming 2% inflation). Although this would affect the funding, because grant is a fairly small element of LBC's funding, it would not by itself significantly impact on the projections unless associated with a change to distribution arrangements.

7.50   The largest area of challenge for the council on funding is dependence on £38m from capitalisation directives from 2025/26 onwards. This has not yet been agreed with DLUHC and, even if it were to be agreed, it would not be an easy solution for the council because of the additional borrowing it would require. The 2024/25 budget report referred to discussions the council was having with DLUHC about other ways of addressing this shortfall – such as writing off the debt – but that seems an unlikely solution particularly given the pressures on 'unprotected departments' funding.

What the need to deliver savings could mean for libraries

7.51   The MTFP includes savings of £20m each year from 2025/26 onwards, amounting to £60m being taken out of the budget by 2027/28. Savings of at least this level will be required if the council is to reduce/eliminate dependence on capitalisation directives even if provision made by the council in other areas, such as demand growth, turned out to be more than required.

7.52   Savings included in the MTFP as already agreed amount to £12.0m by 2027/28 (note, this does not include savings from libraries - see Appendix C to the 2024/25 budget report at link). This leaves a further £48.0m savings to be found by 2027/28.

7.53   Libraries are a very small element of the overall council budget and therefore savings within libraries are unlikely to make much of a dent in the further savings required. LBC's 2023/24 budget book (page 167/CRER 3.3 at link) shows a gross controllable budget of £6.2m and net controllable budget of £3.6m. This includes culture and leisure as well as libraries.

7.54   It should also be noted that net expenditure on libraries per head of population was amongst the lowest in London boroughs in 2022/23 based on revenue outturn returns to MLUHC in 2022/23 (see Annex C to this briefing note).

Wider context for savings

7.55   The council intends to take a more strategic approach to budget savings overall which provides context within which changes to the library service should be considered.

7.56   Key extracts from the budget report are as follows:

'The savings programme is focused on the Council's priorities:

   1. The Council balances its books, listens to residents and delivers good, sustainable services.

   2. Croydon is a place of opportunity for business, earning and learning.

   3. Every child and young person in Croydon has the chance to thrive, learn and fulfil their potential.

   4. Croydon is a cleaner, safer and healthier place, a borough to be proud of.

   5. People can lead healthier and independent lives for longer.'

'The scale of savings required by the Council cannot be met through 'salami slicing' or just stopping some services. Croydon is committed to service transformation that delivers both financial and service benefits. The Council set aside £10m to fund transformation work in 2023-24 and a further £5m per annum is budgeted for 2024-28. An update on the transformation projects is provided in Appendix D (see link). Given the magnitude of Croydon's financial challenge the level of the transformation

budget will be regularly reviewed so that the transformation plans can be delivered safely and sustainably.'

Table AAi.2: Appendix A from 2024/25 budget report to Cabinet and Budget Council in Feb/March 2024

London Borough of Croydon - 2024-28 Medium Term Financial Plan

Assumes continued capitalisation directions of £38m per annum

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28
	£'m	£'m	£'m	£'m
Departmental and Corporate Base Budget	383.702	383.702	383.702	383.702
Demand and demographic pressures	10.717	22.292	27.232	32.369
Provision for future demand and demographic growth		2.425	11.485	20.348
Legacy budget corrections	0.806	1.306	1.806	2.306
Proposed Savings	-23.731	-30.706	-35.725	-35.751
Saving in borrowing costs from asset disposals	-6.684	-9.167	-9.947	-9.947
Future savings target beyond 2024-25 (assumes overall increase in incremental savings of £20m per annum)		-13.025	-28.006	-47.980
Provision for inflation	18.183	30.183	42.183	54.183
Net cost of borrowing (interest, MRP & investment income)	65.766	67.506	67.336	67.356
Risk/contingency provision	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000
Economic demand pressures contingency	0.000	5.000	10.000	15.000
Council Tax Hardship fund	0.500	0.500	0.500	0.500
Transformation investment	5.000	5.000	5.000	5.000
Gross Budget Requirement	459.259	470.016	480.566	492.086
Core grant funding	-43.929	-44.368	-44.812	-45.260
Use of the capitalisation directive	-38.000	-38.000	-38.000	-38.000
Business Rates - compensation grant for under indexing the business rates multiplier	-16.063	-16.384	-16.712	-17.046
Net Budget Requirement (as per the budget book)	361.267	371.263	381.042	391.780
Financing				
Government Grants:				
Revenue Support Grant	-17.818	-17.996	-18.176	-18.358
Croydon Resources				
Business rates top-up grant	-38.146	-38.909	-39.687	-40.481
Business rates income	-43.744	-42.885	-43.743	-44.617
Council tax (4.99% increase modelled for 24/25, a 2.99% increase per annum thereafter),	-259.761	-269.459	-279.140	-289.171
Prior year collection fund surplus	-1.798	0.000	0.000	0.000
Total Financing	- 361.267	- 369.249	- 380.746	- 392.627
Budget deficit excluding new savings	- 0.000	2.015	0.296	- 0.848

Table AAi: 2: Forecast for non-protected departmental budgets from 2025/26 – Office for Budget Responsibility March 2024

1. Government forecasts in the budget implied average 1% per annum increase in real terms in departmental revenue budgets from 2025/26 to 2028/29.

2. No detailed plans of how this spending growth will be split between departments.

3. OBR calculated 'unprotected departments' spending would have to fall by 2.3% per annum in real terms based on the following assumptions:

   a. NHS spending in England rises by 3.6% per annum in real terms.[15]

   b. Defence held flat as a share of Gross Domestic Product – ie 2%.

   c. Overseas development spending held flat as a share of Gross Domestic Product – ie 0.7%.

   d. Schools spending is held flat per pupil in real terms.

   e. Additional £3.9m per annum announced for free child care in autumn 2023 is protected in cash terms.

4. 'Unprotected departments spend' would reduce by 3.6% per annum in real terms if defence spending were increased to 2.5% of GDP and overseas development spending increased back to 0.7%.

5. The OBR conclusion was that:

   'Delivering a 2.3 per cent a year real terms fall in day-to-day spending would present challenges. Performance indicators for public services continue to show signs of strain and there are other near-term fiscal risks, such as the potential need for countries to provide a greater amount of aid to Ukraine and alleviate funding pressures on local authorities. Longer term pressures on public spending, such as from climate change and an ageing population, are also building, as discussed in our Fiscal risks and sustainability reports…. The implementation of these assumptions for departmental spending therefore remain a significant risk to our forecast.'

Source: OBR Economic and Fiscal Outlook – March 2024: Pages 98 to 105 at link

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[15] in line with: 1. IFS central scenario for the Government's Long-Term NHS Workforce Plan; 2. Average real terms growth in NHS spending from 1949-50 to 2022-23 although above real terms growth in recent years