

Item: Libraries Review

Considered by Scrutiny & Overview Committee on 17 September 2024

REC No.	SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATION	DEPARTMENT AND CABINET MEMBER RESPONDING	ACCEPTED / PARTIALLY ACCEPTED / ALREADY IN PROGRESS / REJECTED (inc. reasons for rejection)	IDENTIFIED OFFICER	ANY FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS	TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS IF ACCEPTED (i.e. Action Plan)	DATE OF SCRUTINY MEETING TO REPORT BACK
SOC.3.24/25	To ensure that there is time and resource available to allow for sufficient engagement with each of the four local communities over the future of their library sites identified for closure, the Committee recommends that a more flexible approach is taken to the closure date, including considering whether a staggered closure would help to manage the available resource for consultation and engagement on the design of the mitigation actions and outreach services in collaboration with affected groups.	Councillor Andy Stranack – Cabinet Member for Communities & Culture	<p>PARTIALLY ACCEPTED</p> <p>The library service have reviewed the project implementation timeline and considered the options in light of feedback from the committee.</p> <p>A further two weeks have now been proposed to allow for further engagement with local residents and groups who use the libraries proposed to close.</p> <p>The proposed date for the four libraries to close is now 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> November.</p> <p>If Cabinet decides to adopt the proposed model, during this period the service will communicate with local groups and library users and support them to continue accessing services through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Digital and print communication on the new library model to commence from 4<sup>th</sup> Oct.</li> <li>- Engagement with library group leads and alternative venues identified for each group currently taking place in the library.</li> <li>- A meeting with local friends or resident group at each library proposed to close to discuss the new model and future plans for the buildings.</li> </ul>	Kristian Aspinall – Director of Culture & Community Safety	N/A	From 4 <sup>th</sup> Oct	

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			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Publication of the bus schedule from 4<sup>th</sup> Oct to enable residents with access needs to travel to their nearest library.</li> <li>- Drop in sessions at the four libraries proposed to close to promote the digital offer and support users to access the library online.</li> </ul> <p>Local community engagement will continue through implementation of the new library service model.</p> <p>This closing date will also enable the service to deliver the proposed change in opening hours from January and April and to decommission libraries during the quietest period of the year, minimising disruption to the service.</p> <p>At the request of the Committee, a longer delay and a staggered approach were considered but this would delay implementation and the extension of opening hours and the outreach service offer. Staff capacity and funding is needed to be released from the buildings to enable recruitment of new staff and the improvements to the whole service and borough.</p> <p>Closing the four libraries at the same time enables the most efficient use of staff time to manage the decommissioning of contracts and movements of book stock and would be more cost effective by minimising the costs of additional transportation of books and furniture by co-ordinating removals between multiple sites.</p>				

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			This will also enable clearer and more consistent communication to residents about the new library service.				
SOC.4.24/25	To ensure that the proposed library model was delivering an improved service that meets the Department for Culture Media and Sports (DCMS)'s requirements to provide an "comprehensive and efficient" service as well as increasing the usage of the Council's library provision, the Committee recommends that a full review of the new model, including an assessment of the mitigation measures, is undertaken after 12 months of delivery.	Councillor Andy Stranack – Cabinet Member for Communities & Culture	<p>ALREADY IN PROGRESS</p> <p>The library service had already planned to undertake a review of the implementation and the impact of the new model twelve months after delivery. This will also be shared with DCMS to maintain good communication with them and take on any further advice or recommendations they have to ensure the service is continuing to improve and is meeting statutory requirements.</p>	Kristian Aspinall – Director of Culture & Community Safety	N/A	May 2026	
SOC.5.24/25	Although it was noted by Committee that the consultation had received a decent number of responses, higher than previous library consultations, it further stated the importance to assess the effectiveness of the consultation through its ability to engage all sections of society and communities affected, particularly harder to reach group. As such, the Committee recommends that the consultation process is reviewed to identify good practice and lessons learned to inform future	Councillor Andy Stranack – Cabinet Member for Communities & Culture	<p>ACCEPTED</p> <p>The council will review the consultation process and take learning forward from the experience of this consultation, including feedback from residents on the process, to inform and improve future resident engagement and consultation.</p> <p>The Library Service had developed the consultation programme with the aim to combine general publicity and public meetings with focussed engagement with groups less likely to be reached that way. This included visits to a school, holiday and activity clubs, the youth engagement bus, sheltered accommodation activities, local community partnership meetings and meetings with groups of adults with learning disabilities.</p>	Kristian Aspinall – Director of Culture & Community Safety	N/A		

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	consultations, particularly how the Council can engage with harder to reach communities.		<p>This depth of engagement generated a rich picture of feedback across the borough and can be used as a model for other services in the Council to learn from when planning their own consultation.</p> <p>The summary of consultation activity and approach will be shared with other services planning consultation as a resource.</p>			October 2024	

## Conclusions of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee on the Libraries Review

Under the standard reporting process for Scrutiny recommendations, the conclusions of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee would be presented to Cabinet as part of the Stage 1 report. As the recommendations on the Libraries Review are being presented outside the standard process, to ensure their timely consideration, the conclusions from the Scrutiny & Overview Committee's consideration are presented below to provide additional context for the recommendations.

Following its review of the Administration's proposals arising from the Library Review, the Committee reached the following conclusions: -

1. The Committee recognised that there had been a significant amount of time and effort invested into the Library Review. The Committee noted the response level of the consultation was significantly higher than previous library consultations in Croydon, which was to be welcomed, although the challenge of engaging with harder to reach groups was recognised.
2. The Committee noted that there were legal risks to the Council, should the proposed model be agreed by Cabinet. Officers advised committee members that they had worked to mitigate these risks as much as possible. Committee therefore concluded that the risk of either a judicial review being brought or a request being submitted to the Secretary of State to review the Council's delivery of its duty to have a best value library service (one that was "comprehensive and efficient") had to be accepted.
3. Specific to the proposed closure of Shirley Library, although the Committee was advised the Council was reviewing the potential legal exposure inherent to the covenant on the site, Members were not provided with detailed assurances at the meeting and as such could not make a judgement on this point.
4. The Committee acknowledged that the loss of even one library was hard for communities and that this loss needed to be effectively mitigated by working closely with community partners and residents on alternative provision.
5. The Committee noted that some areas of the UK had seen a loss of over 50% of their library provision, particularly in areas of deprivation. In light of the national context, the Committee recognised these challenges also affected Croydon. The committee further remarked that the proposed new library model's successful delivery would be dependent on ensuring the delivery of the proposals (including outreach services and loss of services' mitigations) met the needs of residents affected by the proposed closures.
6. The Committee welcomed confirmation that the Council was exploring a wider range of options, other than Community Asset Transfers, for the future use of the four library buildings identified for closure. The Committee highlighted the importance of working closely with affected community groups and residents to ensure that the best solution was found for the respective buildings and tailored to local needs.
7. In the context of local authorities' funding decline over the years, Committee highlighted the ability of those councils that managed to avoid libraries' closures and maintain the quality of service through income generation. In Croydon, the Committee was advised that previous attempts to improve income had not been successful through a combination of challenges: limited staffing resources to dedicate to income generation in addition to business as usual activities and in some cases, library facilities/buildings not being suited to income generating activities.
8. The Committee was not assured that there was sufficient resource or time available to conduct the planned engagement activities with local community groups and residents to refine the mitigation proposals before the proposed closure date for the four libraries on 25 October 2024.