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One more chance...to share your library love (and frustration) in the Birmingham Libraries Public Consultation 2024

Yes, we also thought the last phase was the final phase, but Birmingham City Council has announced another short round of consultation on a revised option 4. It is open for comments until 3 November 2024. A report recommending the revised option 4 and recording public feedback is due to go to Cabinet (the council's executive) in January 2025.

It is because of YOU that the Council has had to adapt their proposals. Now is the time to keep pushing back. Demand better, demand our public libraries are protected, professionally staffed, and properly funded by Birmingham City Council. This city NEEDS (and loves) its libraries.¹

What's going on? Didn't we just do this?

The consultation team has released a revised option 4 that they say will be their recommendation to Birmingham City Council's Cabinet in January. The Council has redistributed one day from each of the 'hub' libraries (which will now be open 4 days a week) to ten of the 'part-time' libraries (which will be open 3 days a week) and designated another library as a 'hub' for Ladywood Constituency (Small Heath). We think this redistribution is the result of hard campaigning by people all over the city and the way library lovers stood together to complain about the stark disparity the original proposal would have created. **However, like all of you library lovers we remain profoundly concerned about the impact of a 40% cut on our library service.**

We advise:

1. Registering your frustration about the proposed 40% cut with the consultation team on LibrariesPublicConsultation@birmingham.gov.uk
2. Completing their 3-question survey (<https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/bcc/revised-option-4-proposal/>), ticking 'all libraries' and saying you strongly disagree with the proposal and explaining why in the text box (we've given some suggestions below).

¹ <https://www.birminghamloveslibraries.org/why-libraries-matter>

3. Complete their survey again, this time for the library you use the most (you can do this multiple times, one for each library). Do not feel pressured to agree with their proposal – everyone is entitled to demand a library that is open full-time!
4. Email your councillor(s) and MP (info on how to do this below) to protest the 40% cut and ask them to stand up for the people of this city who deserve better!

More information about the proposed cuts:

Our libraries remain under threat from a drastic cut of about 40%. Libraries do not count for much as a percentage of the council budget, but as with all our services, they are being targeted for deep cuts. The Council is proposing to merge the Library Service with the Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service (NAIS). The target cut is £2,300,000 from the two budgets: the current community libraries budget of £5,370,000 and the NAIS budget of £350,000. This is a cut of 40%, which would hollow out our library service.

Right now, Birmingham has 35² community libraries of which 18 were open 5 days a week before the council “temporarily” closed them an extra day a week in July this year.

The new proposals reveal once again the severity of the cuts proposed:

- Over the whole city, we stand to lose 40% of library opening hours. Such a drastic reduction would make it harder for people, nurseries, and schools to visit a library.
- Full-time (open 5 days a week) community libraries would be a thing of the past in our city of 1.2 million.
- There would be further degradation of the library service due to reduction in the number of trained staff. There has been no explanation of staffing plans so far.
- Our FOIs have revealed no forward plan for the materials fund or ‘book fund’ used to purchase books for adults and children, reference works, books in community languages as well as journals, magazines, newspapers, audiovisual materials, and digital resources. Birmingham already has among the lowest rates of investment per resident in the country.³
- There is no mention of maintenance to keep our library buildings up to standard.
- 20% of our libraries would be transferred out of council ownership, impeding interlibrary loans and data management and removing the statutory protection of these libraries
- There is the potential for the overwhelming of core library services by needs of other adult-focused advice services as well as challenges with safeguarding arrangements of vulnerable users (and especially children) in spaces with co-located services.
- These proposals would undermine the Council’s own early intervention and prevention approach: communities would not have consistent access to a public place that is warm, non-judgemental, and equipped to support both learning and signposting to other community places and services.

² Spring Hill is currently “closed 'temporarily'...awaiting a feasibility study over the costs of replacing a boiler and pipeworks” , <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/anger-over-birmingham-libraries-cuts-29791979>); Balsall Heath, previously a full-time library, is currently closed as part of the wider restoration works to Moseley Road Baths (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-66375551>).

³ Data from CIPFA/Tim Coates, 2024.

In addition to the slashing of the budget and opening hours, we are concerned about how our libraries will be staffed. The council is proposing to merge community library services with advice services, “combining the teams under one future budget.”

Library work and advice services work differs in terms of the kind of work, training and expertise required. We have received no assurance that libraries will be run and staffed by trained library professionals. On the other hand, we are concerned about the stress that library staff would be under if they are tasked with ever more advice work without proper support (whilst services they are supposed to be signposting to are at risk of cuts!).

We believe:

- Our city needs a publicly funded library service which is professionally staffed by trained librarians and library workers.
- People in every neighbourhood need easy access to a library that is open more days than it is shut.
- We need investment in libraries as part of our city’s educational infrastructure, enabling lifelong learning in a country where 1 in 6 adults has difficulty reading.⁴
- Public libraries are especially important in a city where over 45% of children grow up in poverty, limiting their access to books, learning resources, and space to learn, play and study.⁵
- Libraries are already community hubs, preventative services and ‘universal spaces’! We want our libraries protected and open so they will be available for all to use for generations to come.

Birmingham City Council has a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service to all who live, work or study in the area. We believe they also have a moral duty to provide a service that meets the needs and aspirations of the people of Birmingham.

Although many people feel worn out from the previous consultations, please don’t give up. **Please email your councillor(s) and MP to express concern about the future of your libraries. We recommend you copy in Council Leader Cllr Cotton (john.cotton@birmingham.gov.uk) and Cabinet Member responsible for libraries, Cllr Suleman (saima.suleman@birmingham.gov.uk). In your letter, it helps to include a personal story that explains why you love your library.**

You can find councillors' email addresses here:
<https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/councillors/search>.

Contact information for MPs can be found here: <https://members.parliament.uk/FindYourMP>.

You can also write to your councillors and MP at <https://www.writetothem.com/>.

⁴ National Literacy Trust, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>.

⁵ 'Birmingham: A Child Poverty Emergency', <https://childpoverty.birminghamlive.co.uk/>.

In case you missed it: the consultation in more detail

The revised proposal is presented here (the link to the survey is at the bottom of the page):
<https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/bcc/revised-option-4-proposal/>

Information about the consultation and its final phase can be found here:
https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50306/commissioners_intervention_and_improvement/2903/consultations_to_help_us_reshape/2

The Libraries Consultation: What does it say?

Because libraries are a statutory service (that's right, mandated by law), Birmingham City Council (BCC) is running a consultation on proposals to close libraries, drastically reduce opening hours, cut staffing levels, and create 10 "community library hubs". They ran a long Phase 1 with vaguely described options, a second 'final' phase, and now a short phase on a revised option, from October 23rd until November 3rd.

In the 'revised option 4', there would be 10 community library hubs, one per constituency as follows:

LIBRARIES	CONSTITUENCY
Acocks Green	Yardley
Druids Heath	Selly Oak
Erdington	Erdington
Handsworth	Perry Barr
Kings Heath	Hall Green
Small Heath	Ladywood
Mere Green	Sutton Coldfield
Northfield	Northfield
Quinton	Edgbaston
Ward End	Hodge Hill & Solihull North

In Option 4.1, the Council's recommended option, they propose to have:

- 10 part-time BCC community library hubs, open 28 hours (4 days) a week
- 9 part-time BCC libraries, open 21 hours (3 days) a week
 - Birchfield, Hall Green, Kings Norton, Shard End, South Yardley, Sparkhill, Stirchley, Weoley Castle, Yardley Wood
- 4 part-time BCC libraries, open 14 hours (2 days) a week
 - Balsall Heath, Kingstanding, Perry Common, Sheldon
- 1 co-located BCC library (a council-run library moved into a non-council building), open 21 hours a week: Harborne
- 3 co-located BCC libraries (a council-run library moved into a non-council building), open 14 hours a week: Aston, Selly Oak, Tower Hill

- 7 libraries to have all BCC funding withdrawn and be handed over to “partners”. The bottom line is these libraries will receive no council funding and be run by community partners or close:
 - Bartley Green, Bloomsbury, Boldmere, Frankley, Glebe Farm, Sutton Coldfield, Walmley
- 1 more mobile library vehicle
- Spring Hill Library would remain closed

What’s wrong with this option?

The options presented by the council represent a profound attack on a library system that has already suffered multiple rounds of cuts since 2010. They would leave a city of 1.2 million with fewer libraries, open less often, and staffed by fewer trained staff. Our libraries would remain vulnerable to further cuts as slashed opening hours and closed libraries undermine the usability of the library service.

The proposals are particularly damaging for people who want to do more in a library than pick up a book to check out. They would make it harder for the most vulnerable in our communities to find a warm, accessible, non-judgemental space to seek solace and rest. They would make it harder for people in digital poverty to have access to the internet, printing, and scanning. They would also make it harder for children to use libraries. Children and their parents and carers use libraries as spaces to play and read together; young people, especially those in crowded or temporary accommodation, rely on the library to read, learn and study. With fewer opening days, there is one less safe and warm public space to visit. Fewer libraries and shorter opening hours also reduce the ability of schools to visit libraries as there are fewer visiting slots available and fewer staff to manage the visits.

Thank you for spending your time reading this guide and telling the Council and your MP how much you love your library. For more library love, please enjoy the Brum Library Zine, now in virtual form: <https://heyzine.com/flip-book/83a3fc029e.html>

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Let us know if you found this guide helpful or if you spot any errors. Please email us (birminghamloveslibraries@gmail.com) with any tips you think we should include, or if you receive any replies from your MP.

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