Birmingham Needs Public Libraries

- **Pause all cuts now! Making such deep cuts to public services so quickly is imprudent and will be costly in the long run.**

  - **Research from the Audit Reform Lab at the University of Sheffield[1] shows that the Oracle IT system (rather than the uncosted equal pay liabilities) is the principal reason a Section 114 was necessary.**
  - **Cuts must be paused for an investigation and independent public interest and value for money assessments.**
  - **Simply taking four years instead of two could reduce cuts by £100 million.**

- **All our libraries must stay open. A network of professionally staffed public libraries is essential in a city with low print and digital literacy and high levels of deprivation and child poverty.**

- **Community libraries are well-used services distributed across the city. The current BCC consultation centres on the false premise that library use is declining. Citizens attempting to respond to the consultation are being asked to answer based on misleading information.**

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 places a duty on Birmingham City Council to provide a "comprehensive and efficient library service" overseen by central government. We expect our Council to live up to this duty.

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[1] https://auditreformlab.group.shef.ac.uk/accountability-crisis-at-bcc/;
https://auditreformlab.group.shef.ac.uk/financial-crisis-in-birmingham-city-council/.

Meeting with Council Leader Cllr John Cotton & Cabinet Member for Digital, Culture, Heritage and Tourism Saima Suleman

June 18 2024

Concerns with (1) Proposed Cuts to BCC Library Service and (2) Libraries Consultation Process

The cuts to the library service will be costly in the long run.

Libraries are very good value for money. Art Council England (ACE) funded research found that "libraries' value could equate to six times their running costs."[2] Libraries are an established lifelong education pathway. The £2.3 million saving risks causing greater costs elsewhere in future.

Properly staffed libraries are essential in a city where 46% of children grow up in poverty.[3] Children's basic literacy is established before they reach school, with library use at age 3 predictive of school-age reading skills. Libraries are, moreover, critical for post pandemic educational recovery.[4] Children in Birmingham must have free access to books, computers, and a space to read and do homework. This is all the more urgent for children and young people living in temporary and/or overcrowded accommodation and children out of school.

Why has no research been done into other alternative options? We think that BCC's proposals are based on minimal research and risk breaching their statutory duty to provide a library service. We recommend the council conduct a proper analysis of the value libraries add to our communities, a cost-benefit analysis of proposed cuts, and a thorough feasibility study on different options.

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[2]https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/07/study-finds-english-libraries-generate-at-least-34bn-in-yearly-value

[3] Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, quoted in https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/cost-of-living/one-two-brummie-kids-now-28511099.

[4]https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/public-libraries-and-literacy-recovery/

The Libraries Consultation is not fit for purpose.

It is problematic to invite expressions of interest to take over running libraries before the consultation on the overall model has been completed.

It is problematic to invite expressions of interest in community asset transfer when the consultation on the proposed mixed delivery model has not yet finished. If a group says they are interested in running a library, does that make that library less likely to be a Council-run hub? If an organisation says they are interested in having a library service in their building, does that mean it is more likely their nearby Council-run library will close?

The consultation documents contain misleading information.

The documents aim to establish that library use has been declining as a justification for 'transformation', through uncontextualised statements such as: "Both locally and nationally, the ways in which people use library services have changed significantly over the last five or so years."

The consultation centres around the specious claim that library use has declined by 45% since 2014 and continues to decline. Freedom of Information data on library use and membership across Birmingham's libraries shows resilient patterns of use following savage cuts which closed libraries and slashed opening hours in 2015/16 and after the pandemic lockdowns. People responding to the consultation risk basing their answers on a misleading premise.

The consultation states: "The current provision of Community Libraries is not concentrated in the centre of the city where there is greatest need." Most community libraries in Birmingham are in areas that are in the most deprived 30% of England.

The proposals are confusing.

There is no clear explanation of how many part-time or full-time community hubs there will be.

There is no clear explanation of how hubs and other colocated services will be staffed and whether this will be by trained library staff or advice services.

There is no information on how library services outsourced through community asset transfer would interface with BCC's own library system.

There is no information on what relationship BCC will have with community groups running libraries and how these library services will be sustainable or able to stay open.

The consultation survey is too long, confusing, and leading.

What are our main concerns with the council's recommended option 4?

1. **Fewer libraries:** By vastly reducing the number of council-run libraries, it neglects our long-established legal right to a 'comprehensive and efficient library service' (Public Libraries and Museums Act, 1964).

2. **Further to travel:** Fewer libraries would increase the distance people have to travel to libraries in a city with limited public transport options. This would have the biggest impact on the elderly, people with disabilities, parents/carers of young children, young people, and people on low incomes.

3. **What is a Community Library hub?** There is scant detail about what community library hubs will look like. BCC suggests community library hubs will act as "platforms for a wider range of positive interactions", offering "all the established library services" and acting as "centres of health and wellbeing, benefits, and employment support". This sounds great in theory, but leaves many questions unanswered. While co-location (having lots of different services in one building) could work, it requires enough space, staff, and "needs to be carefully designed to ensure that the library service is not overwhelmed by other services, and that the services are complementary" (Arts Council 2017). Which buildings could accommodate all of this? How will confidentiality and safeguarding requirements of services be met? How much space will be given to library services? How will these hubs be staffed?

4. **Fragmenting our city library service:** BCC's proposal would fragment what is now a unified library service. Of particular concern is the council's proposal to hand over a significant number of libraries to community ownership and management. Because of data protection rules, it may be difficult for libraries run by community groups to interface with council-run library's loan services. How will the library membership and stock be managed and kept up-to-date? What book stock would community libraries be able to offer? In the consultation documents, BCC notes how at community-run libraries, people could "access a quality library offer, *potentially* including library stock, IT and free Wi-Fi." When does a library stop being a library? When there are no professional library workers? When a collection of books is optional?

5. **Volunteer-run services and community-run libraries face challenges with sustainability:**
   a. **Finding volunteers:** Running a library is hard. The UK government's own research highlights concerns with the sustainability of volunteer-run solutions. A report on community libraries raised the problem that many depended on retirees who, over time, reduced their volunteering time. Government figures show that levels of volunteering are at record lows (Jessel 2023).
   b. **Finding funding:** Will the community organisation have to take on the full responsibility of running and maintaining the building? What would be the financial arrangements between BCC and its leaseholders? Given that libraries

aren't income-generating services, where will it get the funding to pay for the running and maintenance costs? This is especially problematic given that if multiple libraries across Birmingham are being transferred to community organisations, they will be competing for the same funding sources. If there would be any subsidies, that would offset the claimed savings in the proposal.

6. **Increased inequality:** There is little info on how BCC will fulfil their aim of ensuring their library service targets the city's most deprived areas when there are fewer libraries (see problem #1 above). And will more deprived communities have resources to run their own library? Won't this plan add more strain on community organisations already doing so much? How "resilient" do people have to be? Why do we have to run our own public services?

7. **Lack of democratic control of a statutory service:** Removing libraries from the direct control of BCC would wipe out the ability of citizens and councillors to influence the development and management of the service.

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Birmingham Loves Libraries is an umbrella campaign uniting Birmingham Friends of Library groups, Save our Libraries campaigns, and library users and city residents campaigning to protect and champion our libraries and library services.