



www.birminghamloveslibraries.org
birminghamloveslibraries@gmail.com

The *Unofficial* Guide to the ‘Final Phase’ of the Birmingham Libraries Public Consultation 2024

Here we are again. Ready to take you through the latest consultation designed by Birmingham City Council as it attempts to provide as meagre a library service as possible while branding it as “modern” and “transformative”.

Who are we?

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.

Why did we write this guide?

Our libraries are under threat.

The latest proposals from the council preserve only one full-time library per constituency: only 9 “community library hubs” plus the Library of Birmingham.

All other libraries will only be open 2 days a week, with 7 others stripped of council funding and dependent on community groups and 1 more closed permanently.

We believe:

- Our city needs a publicly funded library service which is professionally staffed.
- 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.¹

¹ National Literacy Trust, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>.

- 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.²

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 first round of consultation, we don't want people to give up. **Express your opinions to the consultation team AND your local councillors.**

URGENT ACTION: We recommend you email your councillor(s) and MP to express your concern about the future of your libraries. Please copy in Council Leader Cllr Cotton (john.cotton@birmingham.gov.uk) and Cabinet Member responsible for libraries, Cllr Suleman (saima.suleman@birmingham.gov.uk).

You can find email addresses for your councillors and MP at <https://www.writetothem.com/>.

If you would like to write an open letter to the Council in a professional capacity or on behalf of your organisation or educational institution please contact us at birminghamloveslibraries@gmail.com. Previous examples of letters can be found at <https://www.birminghamloveslibraries.org/blog>.

Consultation Documents

In the rest of this guide we focus on the survey part of the final phase of the consultation. The survey can be completed here: <https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/bcc/lc24/>

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

This includes the info pack for the final phase available for download here: https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/29501/final_phase_consultation_launch_pack

The info pack is 72 pages long but key pages are pp. 26 - 41 where the two proposed options are described.

The consultation team is holding a drop-in session at every library. We've included the list at the end of this guide. It's available for download too: https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/adults-communities/lc24/supporting_documents/Final%20PhaseConsultation%20dates%20v4%20accessible.pdf

² Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, quoted in <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/cost-of-living/one-two-brummie-kids-now-28511099>.

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 their proposals to close libraries, drastically reduce opening hours, cut staffing levels, and create 10 "community library hubs". They ran a Phase 1 with a long survey and vaguely described options and then without much warning at the end announced a second phase, which has just started (from August 23rd) and runs until September 27th.

In this phase, the Council is focusing on 2 Options: Option 3 and Option 4. Option 4 is their "recommended option". Both are grim reading for library lovers.

In both options, including the Library of Birmingham, 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
Library of Birmingham	Ladywood
Mere Green	Sutton Coldfield
Northfield	Northfield
Quinton	Edgbaston
Ward End	Hodge Hill & Solihull North

The two options differ in the number of part-time libraries as well as their opening hours.

In Option 3, the Council proposes to have:

- 10 full-time BCC community library hubs as listed above
- 6 part-time BCC libraries, open 24 hours a week
 - Birchfield, Kings Norton, Perry Common, Sheldon, Sparkhill, Weoley Castle
- 2 co-located BCC libraries (a council-run library moved into a non-council building, open 24 hours a week
 - Harborne, Tower Hill
- 7 libraries to have all BCC funding withdrawn and be handed over to "partners" (this is described in vague language, so could be (a) via community asset transfer where a community group own and manage a local library building; (b) an organisation managing and staffing the library in a BCC or other building; (c) an organisation funding BCC to run the library, though this latest option in particular is even less explained than the others!). 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

In this option, the following 11 libraries would close and be replaced only by a mobile library stop: Aston, Balsall Heath, Hall Green, Kingstanding, Selly Oak, Shard End, Small Heath, South Yardley, Spring Hill, Stirchley, Yardley Wood. However, it's worth noting that while BCC claims that they would be replaced with a mobile library stop, the map of additional stops provided does not actually cover all these libraries. Selly Oak constituency for example ends up as a library desert with no library buildings or mobile stops except for Druids Heath on the very southern edge of the constituency boundary.

7 more libraries are at risk of closure if community partners do not manage to run them.

In Option 4, the Council's recommended option, they propose to have:

- 10 full-time BCC community library hubs as listed above
- 14 part-time BCC libraries, open 14 hours (2 days) a week
 - Balsall Heath, Birchfield, Hall Green, Kings Norton, Kingstanding, Perry Common, Shard End, Sheldon, Small Heath, South Yardley, Sparkhill, Stirchley, Weoley Castle, Yardley Wood
- 4 co-located BCC libraries (a council-run library moved into a non-council building), open 14 hours a week
 - Aston, Harborne, Selly Oak, Tower Hill
- 7 libraries to have all BCC funding withdrawn and be handed over to "partners" (similar to above). This means they will either 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 these options?

Both options represent a profound attack on a library system that has already suffered multiple rounds of cuts since 2010. They leave a city of 1.2 million with fewer libraries, open less often (in the preferred option 4, a mere 2 days a week for most libraries), and staffed by fewer trained staff. It will leave our libraries more 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 make it harder for people in digital poverty to have access to the internet, printing, and scanning.

The proposals would 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. Moreover, fewer libraries and shorter opening hours reduces the ability of schools to visit libraries as there are less visiting slots available and fewer staff to manage the visits.

Implications of the proposed cuts include:

- Only 10 full-time libraries for a city of 1.2 million, with all others closed more days than they are open.
- A drastic reduction in the total number of library opening hours, making it much harder for people, nurseries, and schools to visit a library.
- Further degradation of the library service due to reduction in the number of trained staff.
- Fragmentation of the service with 20% of our libraries transferred out of council ownership, impeding interlibrary loans and data management and removing the statutory protection of these libraries
- The potential for the overwhelming of core library services by needs of other adult-focused advice services
- Challenges with safeguarding arrangements of vulnerable users (and especially children) in spaces with co-located services.
- Undermining of the Council's own early intervention and prevention approach, as communities do not have consistent access to a public place that is accessible, warm, non-judgemental, and equipped to support both learning and signposting to other community places and services.

Please write to your councillors and MP highlighting these problems. We'd love to receive a copy of your letters on birminghamloveslibraries@gmail.com. Pressure on our elected officials is essential.

The Survey (it's shorter this time!)

The survey can be found at <https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/bcc/lcf24/>.

Rather unhelpfully, it does not explain the options and so asks you to read the full information pack found here:

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/29501/final_phase_consultation_launch_pack

We have summarised the proposals contained in that pack above (you're welcome). **We urge you to let the consultation team know that you reject both options.** You can offer alternative suggestions, but to be honest, that is their job so if you feel overwhelmed by that, just let them know that what's on the table is not good enough!

Ok, let's dive into the questions. Under each question of the survey we've included some guidance and suggestions.

1. From the options shared in the pack, which is your preferred option?

We recommend selecting "I don't agree with either option and have an alternative suggestion."

In the box where you asked to explain your answer, please suggest pausing the cuts pending a public inquiry into Birmingham's Section 114 Notice. The Audit Reform Lab at the University of Sheffield has released a report in which they propose an alternative solution for Birmingham that could save hundreds of millions, making library cuts unnecessary (read it here: <https://auditreformlab.group.shef.ac.uk/value-for-money-and-accountability/>). Some Birmingham MPs have backed their call for a public inquiry, and we urge you to request the cuts be halted until this inquiry is conducted.

Relevant news stories can be found here:

- <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/22/birmingham-politicians-call-for-planned-cuts-to-be-halted-or-scaled-back>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/20/birmingham-bust-wrong-truth-damning>

Further to this, we suggest you point out that the Council's premise – their claim that change to the library service is necessary because “*Since 2014 Birmingham has seen a reduction in people accessing Library buildings but has seen an uptake and more emphasis on online activities and events, mobile service and Library services at home*” – is flawed. People's use of libraries has **not** changed in ways that justify reducing building-based library service.

- FOI (Freedom of Information) data on library use does not support the assessment. Comparison with 2014 data is problematic unless the data is adjusted to take into account the devastating cuts to the service in 2016/7 which impacted resident's ability to access library services, as well as differences in the ways data was collected then. FOI data shows libraries are used and in demand, with footfall and loans returning to previous levels since the end of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns.
- Consultation responses demonstrate the negative impact of previous reductions in library opening hours, a trend that would be further exacerbated by the proposals to drastically cut opening hours: *'The top reason for not visiting a Library in the last 12 months was because 'opening hours don't work' for respondents.'*
- Consultation responses reported by the Council contradict the assessment that people need something different from their library service. Responses indicate people's 'top 5 interests' at a community library hub correspond with what our libraries already provide:
 - *Top 5 services used in the Library: 1) Borrow a book (94%), 2) Access to information/advice (53.9%), 3) Attend Library community events/activities/groups (51.6%), 4) Access to public PC (49.9%), 5) Space to meet people or study (42.1%)*
 - *Website features visited most often: 1) Reservations and renewals (58.4%), 2) Library catalogue (56.5%), 3) Finding nearest Library opening times (44.9%)*
 - *Top 5 interests at a community Library hub: 1) Book lending services (86.5%), 2) Cultural events and activities (46.1%), 3) Children and youth services (37.2%), 4) Access to study space (37.1%), 5) Access to PCs (34.3%)*

- One final point: mobile libraries are more suitable for sparsely populated rural areas with pockets of users scattered across wide areas. Birmingham is a city with more than a million people. One more mobile library vehicle is in no way a substitute for any of our community libraries.

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to have a Community Library Hub in each constituency?

We suggest you select “Disagree” and explain that insufficient information has been provided on the impact of co-locating other services inside libraries. Concerns and questions raised during Phase 1 of the consultation have not been addressed, including how libraries will be staffed.

It’s worth noting that the idea of co-locating services was not endorsed by respondents to Phase 1 of the consultation: 38% disagreed, 27% agreed, 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 13% didn’t know. We’re also not sure why percentages were omitted in the reporting of these results in the Council’s info pack...

- Extent respondents agree or disagree on co-locating services within the community hubs proposal: Strongly disagree (1013 - 22%), Neither agree nor disagree (963 - 21%), Agree (910 - 20%), Disagree (732 - 16%), Don’t know (597 - 13%), Strongly agree (306 - 7%)

3. Do you agree with the Libraries selected to be Community Library Hubs?

We suggest you choose “Don’t agree we should have Community library hub” and explain that you believe all libraries are already community hubs because of the wide range of services that they provide for many sectors of the community and that you want all libraries in Birmingham to remain open and professionally staffed.

4. Please share which hubs you don’t agree with and where they should be?

We suggest you ignore this divisive question!

5. Based on the proposed Community Library Hubs model, how likely would you want to access services from there?

If the proposed community hub is too far away or difficult to get to, we suggest you say so. However, you can leave this rather oddly worded question blank and still proceed in the survey.

6. When you think of a Community Library Hub what does this look and feel like to you?

We suggest you say something like: “I want my local library to be open full-time, with all the services it currently offers, and with sufficient investment in staff, service development, building and stock.”

7. The following questions are related to a proposal for a specific Library. Please select which Library proposal you are responding to:

Select your local library...

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the recommended proposal (option 4) for the selected library?

What you write here will depend on what's proposed for your local library (we suggest for all you choose "disagree"/"strongly disagree" or perhaps "I don't know" if it's a full-time hub). We've made suggestions for each one.

Suggested answer for a designated part-time library: I am relieved that it would not be closed down altogether (as many libraries would be under Option 3), but I am concerned that its already limited opening hours are being cut by a third/so drastically under Option 4.

A 2-day a week library service is not adequate provision, and this will severely impact me and my family. (Feel free to elaborate with a personal story.) There can be no justification for cutting library provision given the value of libraries and the alternative to budget cuts that has been presented by The Audit Reform Lab.

Suggested answer for a designated full-time library hub: I am concerned about how my library will be impacted by having to accommodate other services in the same building. I don't know whether I will still be able to use my library in the same way that I do now. (Feel free to tell a personal story about how you use your library.) There is no justification in the data or the consultation responses for making these changes.

Suggested answer for a designated co-located library service: I am very concerned about what will remain of my library service once it is co-located in another building and hours have been slashed to only 14 hours a week. I don't know whether I will still be able to use my library in the same way that I do now. (Feel free to elaborate on how you use your library.) There can be no justification for cutting library provision given their value and the alternative to budget cuts that has been presented by The Audit Reform Lab.

Suggested answer for a library designated to be closed: I am devastated that my library could be permanently closed. This will have a severe impact on me and my family. (Feel free to elaborate). There can be no justification for cutting library provision given their value and the alternative to budget cuts that has been presented by The Audit Reform Lab.

Suggested answer for a designated partner/community-run library: I am devastated that BCC proposes to withdraw funding from my library. I am very concerned about what the future holds for my library and whether it will survive. I don't know whether I will still be able to use my library in the same way that I do now. (Feel free to tell a personal story about how you use your library. Things to mention especially with this option are help from trained library staff and access to the city-wide loans collection.)

9. At what time would you most likely want to access a Library service from the selected library? (Select up to three only)

Choose all the times that work best for you.

10. On what days would you want to access a Library service from the selected library? (Select all that apply)

Choose all the days that work best for you throughout the year.

11. Is there anything about your selected Library that we have not considered or anything we should be made aware of?

This is an opportunity to sing the praises of your local library and library staff, and to point out anything you think they have overlooked.

12. Based on the information shared in the final consultation pack, is it clear why Birmingham City Council must make changes to its current library service.

We suggest you answer "Not at all clear" and repeat your answers to Question 1.

13. Is there anything else that you would like us to consider as part of the consultation?

This is your opportunity to write an essay or have a personal rant. Ideas are available here on our blog: <https://www.birminghamloveslibraries.org/blog>.

14. As part of the part-time library offer we are inviting community groups and volunteers to help people access the Library on more days/hours by supporting the Library to remain open longer. If this is something you would be interested in, please register your interest here (please note if you have already registered interest in the first Libraries Be Heard questionnaire, there is no need to register interest again).

We strongly advise that you do not register interest in this at this stage. This question is problematic before the outcome of the consultation has been announced. Will answering yes to this mean BCC reduces your library's opening hours? Maybe. We don't know, but we don't think it's worth the risk.

The rest of the survey relates to you and legally protected characteristics. Note that you can choose "do not wish to answer" for these questions if you prefer.

Thank you for spending your time reading this guide and telling the Council how much you love your library. Please email your local councillor(s) and MP as well. It is really important that we speak up. <3

One last request. Please go to the library drop-ins if you can, especially as the timings of the sessions make it difficult for many people to attend. Take along letters for those who can't go, bring your poems and odes to libraries...or just simply say Birmingham needs all of its libraries. And it needs them open more than 2 days a week! After the drop-in...yes, you guessed it, please drop an email to your local councillor and MP.

Final Phase - Library In-person Consultation Dates

Drop-in sessions, no booking required.

Library	Date	Time
Acocks Green Library	Thu 05.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Aston Library	Thu 19.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Balsall Heath (Venue-The Old Print Works)	Wed 11.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Bartley Green Library	Tue 17.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Birchfield Library	Tue 10.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Bloomsbury Library	Wed 04.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Boldmere Library	Thu 12.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Druids Heath Library	Tue 24.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Erdington Library	Thu 12.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Frankley Library	Wed 25.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Glebe Farm Library	Wed 18.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Hall Green Library	Thu 05.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Handsworth Library	Tue 10.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Harborne Library	Tue 24.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Kings Heath Library	Mon 23.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Kings Norton Library	Fri 20.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Kingstanding Library	Fri 06.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Mere Green Library	Mon 09.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Northfield Library	Mon 02.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Perry Common Library	Mon 23.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Quinton Library	Tue 24.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Selly Oak Library	Mon 23.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Shard End Library	Wed 18.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Sheldon Library	Tue 03.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Small Heath Library	Wed 11.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
South Yardley Library	Mon 16.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Sparkhill Library	Mon 16.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Spring Hill Library (Venue-Library of Birmingham)	Tue 17.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Stirchley Library	Wed 04.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Sutton Coldfield Library	Mon 09.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Tower Hill Library	Thur 26.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Walmley Library	Wed 25.09.24	10:30am-12:00pm
Ward End Library	Wed 18.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Weoley Castle Library	Thu 19.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm
Yardley Wood Library	Tue 24.09.24	3:00pm-4:30pm

Please let us know if you found this guide helpful or if you spot any errors. Email us (birminghamloveslibraries@gmail.com) with any tips you think we should include, or if you notice any problems with the consultation survey.

Version 1
2 September 2024