



Notes of the Public Meeting on Libraries

St Michael's Church Hall,
Poplar Walk, Croydon
Tuesday 26 April 2016
7pm to 9pm

Present: Elizabeth Ash (Chair), Dominique Andrushkiv, Cllr Sara Bashford, Glyn Berry, Patricia Berry, Mahbub Sadiq Bhatti (Vice Chair), Cllr Margaret Bird, Michael Buckley, Pauline Childs, Sheila Childs, Roger Clark (Treasurer), Vernon Cowdy, Kenneth Dudley, Liane Dwyer, Chantel Francis, Dawn Gibbons, Beryl Gowers, David Gowers, Nikkie Griffiths, Cllr Lynne Hale, Zuhair Hanna, Paul Hudson, John Ingman, Susan Jewell, Mark Johnson, Shaun Kennedy, Brian Lancaster, John Lawlor, Maureen Levy, Rita Lewis, Clive Locke, Glenn Morfil, Kai Musa Pokawa, Jennifer Muschamp, Mike Parkinson, Ken Phipps, John Bosco Saldanha, Peter Staveley, Janet Stollery, Sally Ward-Lee, Camilla Wick, Valerie Willis-Skinner +3

Apologies: John Anstey, Kate Clark, Sean Creighton, Anne Giles, Kathleen Garner, Cllr Timothy Godfrey, David Hooper, Mark Johnson, Linda Morris, Grace Onions, Alan Reynolds, Peter Spalding, Reverend Bola Thomas, Gordon Thompson, John Woodhouse, Anthony Waldbaum, Pat Ward-Lee, Cllr Chris Wright.

The first half hour was given to registration, refreshments and networking. There was a display of community information as well as back issues of [The Library Campaigner](#), and copies to take away.

Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the committee. It was agreed that the committee could take photos as well as a recording for the purposes of notes.

The focus of the meeting was on Croydon's 13 libraries and the survey/consultation, to hear the views of the audience, with cabinet members responsible able to answer questions in the absence of any council-run public meetings.

The meeting had been organised at the request of those attending the last CCC meeting. It was felt that consultations are being undertaken with little notice or time to respond. In relation to the libraries survey, few knew of this, and those that did, expressed concern about the difficulty accessing the document, issues with the survey and problems completing it.

All were reminded that CCC is an apolitical group and asked to respect that when speaking in the meeting. The common misconception that librarians should be fighting their corner in public meetings was noted, but their views relating to their work can only be voiced through union reps. Unison had been contacted but had not responded. Unite, who have been active in Bromley, showed interest but could not attend.

The Chair declared her interest as part of [Save Croydon Libraries Campaign](#) since it was formed. This is an informal group, as are most library campaigns, and people dip in and out according to their circumstances. Other members of the Campaign were also present. The Chair is also a Trustee of the national charity, [The Library Campaign](#), and a founding member of [Speak Up for Libraries](#) which is a coalition formed by a fellow library campaigner, the professional body CILIP, UNISON, Voices for the Library and author Alan Gibbons' Campaign for the Book.

Cllr Lynne Hale who is the shadow Cabinet member was introduced. Cllr Sara Bashford was also introduced and it was noted that Cllr Margaret Bird was expected. Cllr Lynne Hale was keen to hear views, answer questions, and take away any issues to follow up.

Apologies had been received from Cllr Timothy Godfrey, the Cabinet member responsible, via email only late in the day of the meeting and these were read to the meeting, in full, as follows,

"Dear Elizabeth Ash,

Many thanks for your email invite to your meeting. Given that you have called the survey a 'sham' principally because the primary way of filling in the survey is on line, I was surprised not to receive a paper invite to this meeting.

I am afraid that while the Council remains in legal dispute with you and the 'Croydon Communities Consortium' it would be inappropriate for me to attend your meeting. Please pass on my apologies.

As you will be aware I was very keen to ensure that as much useful information as possible was put in the public domain to help shape investment decisions in the future.

I remain unhappy with the current Library offer, as an example I do not believe it is sustainable to have a Library service covering a borough population of our size with the current book fund. If we want a rich and enjoyable experience we must invest in our book stock, music offer, specialist collections and publications etc. We must also invest in the infrastructure of Libraries, that is to say the study desks, IT suits etc.

All of this has to be done in a reducing budget as the Government purposefully reduces funding to local government.

With best wishes

Timothy Godfrey
Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Sport"

The Chair offered that neither she nor CCC had called the survey a sham, but this was the view expressed by residents, and this was not just because it was only available online but due to the leading questions it contained and the lack of balance.

The committee felt it was unreasonable that Cllr Godfrey, who clearly had access to the internet, would expect a paper invite when he is overseeing consultations that are only advertised and available online. It was also difficult to understand the delay in reply to an email invitation sent to both Cllr Hale and to Cllr Godfrey, early on 5 April, which Cllr Hale had responded to within hours.

Regarding the so-called legal dispute, the Chair offered that CCC committee held funds for the benefit of the community for a two year programme of work, that the Council, at the end of one year, claimed was for just one year. The delay in resolving the matter lies firmly with the Council, who have still not explained their paperwork or the advice of a council officer on several occasions relating the effect of the grant in the second year if the intention was always that it was one year's funding. Having waited to resolve the matter, the committee [released redacted documents at the request of those present at the last AGM](#).

The committee announced that a meeting is now in the offering and CCC hope this will resolve the matter to the satisfaction of all parties. It was confirmed that all meetings and activities since December 2014 have been funded out of the purses of the committee, supplemented by donations and membership fees taken, to safeguard the funds for the community until such time the matter could be resolved with the council.

Comments and questions were taken from the floor, with subsequent discussion and comment, as follows:

Update from Cllr Lynne Hale

Cllr Hale was concerned about the details contained in the cabinet papers of 21 March 2016 relating to libraries and quoted directly from them.

"Para 6.2 As detailed in the report, the purpose of the community engagement exercise is to seek views about residents' ambitions for Croydon's Library Service and how they may wish to be involved in developing and delivering services. Subject to what the consultation action plan proposes, there may then be a need for formal consultation. Dependent on the nature of the proposal, that consultation may be local or borough-wide. Where this is the case further advice will be given to ensure the consultation process meets the relevant legal requirements."

You can find the full report under agenda item 8, [here](#). The closure date for the consultation is 2 May 2016.

Cllr Hale felt that the focus of libraries should be literature, literacy and learning. Croydon Conservatives are worried that the Council are looking at other ways of fronting up libraries as is happening in Lambeth where there may be a café or a gym with a few shelves of books, run by volunteers. This is a community hub, not a library.

Children do use libraries. There are a number of children in temporary accommodation in Croydon who go to libraries as living accommodation is cramped. Libraries give children access to literacy and learning. Cllr Hale stated a commitment to having the right library offer in place. Cllr Hale was also keen to take back any questions to get an answer, which she will feed back via CCC.

Croydon Library survey/consultation

It was established via a show of hands that few had been aware of the current Croydon libraries survey/consultation. Those who had visited libraries found that even those using libraries knew nothing of the survey.

An attendee commented that he had been led to believe that the survey was about the libraries in Croydon but had been nothing of the kind. Instead it was a survey to invite people to become volunteers.

The consultation hadn't been advertised. Although the officer responsible had advised that there would be no notices or posters, these were appearing in some libraries, along with one display in just one library. During the last library consultation there was a lot of publicity, including notices and paper copies being freely available, including a children's consultation document.

It was inadequate to provide the survey online only as this would exclude a large number of people. One library had been given 100 hard copies, another just 10. Most of the libraries had no copies at all.

Some found that the library staff were taking details to pass on to the council officer, sometimes having to go via the library manager first. A paper copy was then supposed to be sent by post although at least one resident did not then get a copy requested. Another was advised the process was to request it from the local councillors.

Paper copies can be returned to the local library, where staff are expected to scan it to return to the officer. With reduced staffing in libraries concern was expressed that this just adds another task for the already stretched library staff. It also meant that the responses were not confidential.

It was noted that there is no closure date listed on the paper copies.

There was rumour that the survey date has been extended, but no one present could confirm this. [Post-meeting note: Now confirmed to be 16 May 2016.]

Experience completing the online survey

The online survey was difficult to use, with people reporting that it had closed before they had included all they wanted to say.

The survey was thought to be unbalanced and leading. For example, what you value now in Question 3 and what you want in the future (Question 4) offer different options, with only some of the aspects noted on both. The option of staff is omitted in Q4 so the respondent has to note this and add it if they want to include it.

Looking at a paper copy first was considered the best way forward, before completing it online. Completing it online saves the council officer's time. The Save Croydon Libraries website has [a downloadable copy](#) to view or to use for those who cannot or do not want to do it online.

The Campaign is keen to receive comments made so they can ensure these are reflected. Just email SaveCroydonLibraries@gmail.com

It was noted that the survey was heavily skewed towards volunteering. Whether a respondent wants to be a group to take over running the library or just a volunteer wishing to help out with homework club, they count towards interest in delivering/running the library service.

Consultation, Engagement or Survey?

Whether this was a consultation an engagement exercise or a survey was debatable, with it being promoted as an informal engagement exercise but with two of the three councillors speaking to this item in the council meeting referring to it as a consultation. Hear the debate at the Council meeting on 18 April 2016 here, <http://bit.ly/1nXsq6E>, starting at 01:34:10.

Alternative ways to respond

Instead of completing the survey/consultation document, anyone could write or email to alan.nimmo@croydon.gov.uk to have their say. Again, it is worth keeping a copy as well as copying to the campaign and to the local councillor/s.

It was suggested that people could write to the press to highlight the issues and personal views.

The Campaign is open to all views and encourages debate so comments or posts could be submitted to this.

Focus groups

Focus groups are supposed to be taking place but no one had any details. People have asked in the libraries without luck. It was queried how exactly the focus groups were being managed and whether these would start after the survey had finished.

As councillors referred to what people want in the council meeting on 18 April it was assumed that some if not all of these had taken place. Councillors reported calls for pottery and painting workshops, coffee shops and gift and souvenir shops as being priorities expressed to them. The Chair offered that the local campaign had not heard from anyone raising any concern about the lack of a gift shop in any library nor pottery classes. People speaking about libraries generally all want the same things - access to books, access to the internet, a safe place to study, read and relax and a good complement of skilled library workers and librarians to deliver the service.

Previous consultation

During the previous 2011 consultation Cllr Bashford, as cabinet member responsible for libraries, held public meetings to canvass views of residents. It was agreed that all of these meetings were extremely well attended and there was a huge number of people who wanted their thoughts and feelings known. People still appreciate their libraries, librarians and library staff and recognise the need for that service to continue.

Cllr Bashford voiced thanks to CCC for putting on this meeting as without it she and Cllr Hale would not have had the opportunity to hear the views of residents.

Funding leading to closure of libraries

It was acknowledged that council funding was restricted but the proposal to close so many public libraries nationally was wrong. The alternative suggested was that libraries should be open a certain number of days a week with qualified experienced library staff rotating round the various branch libraries. One person offered that if a small number of libraries were to close this was not the end of the world. This had been the view expressed by the now disbanded 'Friends of Croydon Libraries' at the time of the last consultation.

Others disagreed, then and now, noting barriers such as cost and convenience of travel for those less mobile – including those with disabilities, young children who could not travel alone, parents with young children and the elderly. There are a lot of people who can't afford the bus fares to access libraries further afield. Buying books was suggested but it was noted that book prices are high e.g. an A level physics book costs £27.

It was noted that the Council have just found funding to finance the refurbishment of the former Ashburton Library. In addition the funding of events such as the bike ride in Croydon, which is to be repeated, the Ambition Festival which was advertised as far away as Edinburgh, and the Fairness Commission were all possible. None of these are core services. It was therefore debatable whether Croydon was using funds wisely. Some local authorities are running local services well and making effective use of their funding.

Whether there were other sources of funding to bolster the council coffers was questioned.

Children and young people

An attendee expressed the view that young people today do not use libraries like they used to and another that books are not as important to youth of today, who are all online.

To counter this view it was noted that students often queue at Central Library for study places and in a small local branch library in a reasonable affluent area, there were A level students sitting in the children's area, next to the toddler books, studying due to lack of space at PCs and in the quieter adult section.

Another person offered that educational standards in Croydon are quite poor so it is even more important to have a good library service. Students like to go to the library after school and would use it into the evening if it were available and during study leave.

There was concern that so many school libraries were closing libraries or not staffing them.

Students need access to public libraries outside of school hours. Some students don't have the right atmosphere or space at home to study, or ready access to the right materials. They need to use the library.

The point that we need to look out for the next generation by protecting the library service was made and this was met with applause.

Another drew attention to the comment about children not needing books, feeling strongly that a library service for children can only be maintained by qualified library staff, not volunteers.

Carillion and Croydon Council

The relationship and the contract between Croydon Council and Carillion, who deliver the service, was questioned.

It was queried why, if Cllr Godfrey knew the current offer was so poor in terms of bookstock etc, that action had not been taken to hold Carillion to account. It was noted that the poor stock offer may be a knock on effect of low staffing levels. If experienced knowledgeable staff are not managing the service, including overseeing the purchase and the weeding of items in stock the potential to end up with a very poor offer was very likely, including random selections of books in a series. Some very important publications of literary or historical value may be seen on face value as old stock and turfed out if experienced and qualified staff are not overseeing the process.

Another person noted that that the US have a good deal of experience of taking libraries out of local authority control and the outcome has been, with very few exceptions, catastrophic – shorter hours, poor quality stock, with experienced and qualified staff sacked because they are seen as expensive. He felt that what we have in Croydon is a replica of what has been happening in the US.

Priorities for libraries

Priorities voiced were for libraries to be open hours people want to make use of them, an improved offer of books which was considered very poor at present, and more staff to deliver the service.

Book stock

The books catalogue was felt to be inadequate. Books are just listed as unavailable, or as available but prove to be unobtainable. A person who had queried this was told that the catalogue is out of date. Another confirmed that a requested item had not materialised, nor any notification. It was known that some library users were no longer reserving books due to the protracted waiting time to access books showing as in stock. Where the book stock has been reduced the use of the library is reduced.

A person mentioned that there is no one now that can order books in for Croydon libraries as the person who was doing this now covers several boroughs for Carillion.

Library staff

The role fulfilled by library workers was outlined, [referring to an article written by Lauren Smith](#), with a few hardcopies available to take away. It was clear that there is an awful lot more to running a library service than just stamping a few books and this is often overlooked. The needs of students and children are especially important as they often need guidance.

A man shared his personal experience and how invaluable libraries and library staff were. When he had lost his wife, if it was not for the library he wouldn't have accessed information about local groups and activities that made a real difference to his life.

Another spoke of the care and guidance offered to another library user and being happy to wait whilst this support was given as the expertise of librarians was so important.

The excellent service still provided by the remaining library staff was highlighted, with staff often left to apologise for things clearly beyond their control.

Staffing levels

The survey promoted people volunteering. People would like to know how many professional librarians have been made redundant so far.

The Friends of Croydon Libraries group would have liked to continue to speak with the head librarian for updates but this stopped when the service was outsourced, as did the Friends' fundraising efforts as they did not want to raise funds for a private company.

It was noted that within the documentation given with the survey there is a link to summary CIPFA data, which provides a comparison of statistics for library authorities with similar backgrounds. This does give some of the figures. It is not just the qualified staff but experienced library workers that are important. CIPFA does not break staff down by qualification, experience or training so it is difficult to get a full picture.

Volunteers

The issues of volunteers was discussed. Concerns expressed included the unreliability of volunteers. It was agreed that volunteers are extremely public spirited and keen but often unreliable. It was noted, for example, that when visiting Central Library sometimes areas were closed as the volunteers hadn't turned up.

Many of the current volunteers in libraries are not equipped and trained. Instances of observing staff having to constantly oversee the work of a volunteer who was unable to follow clear simple instructions, was mentioned. Another example was given of a parent being advised incorrectly on books suitable for a young child was given.

Volunteers are not cheap. They need to be managed and trained. Volunteers often don't treat roles like they would paid employment and quit with no notice or just don't turn up.

Staffless libraries

Models such as Libraries+, where library users have a card to get access to a staffless library, were discussed. They are promoted as delivering extended hours, but in reality they only give access to the books without any members of staff and only for those over 16/18 years of age.

Carillion's management of libraries

The management of the libraries, by Carillion, was thought to be very poor.

The promise made before the election that Croydon Labour would rip up the contract with Carillion was noted, with no action or mention since. It was questioned what was in the contract and why were the council not doing more to hold Carillion to account.

Save Croydon Libraries campaign felt that what Carillion had been allowed to do with libraries was appalling. Staffing has been further reduced and stock is very poor. Whilst some felt this was due to lack of funds others thought it was more to do with poor management. It is clear from observations fed through to the campaign that staff are not receiving adequate training and are so few in number they are often pushed to cope with demand, and that volunteers are not being trained effectively either. Supporting volunteers impacts on the time of the few remaining staff.

Another offered that Croydon Libraries are known to be one of the most underfunded library service in London. Added to that there seems to be a move to removal or reduction of counters and a drive to get library staff to stand up all day in order to improve efficiency, but it was doubted that this resulted in anything other than tired library workers and library users left hunting for staff when they need help!

It appeared that staff working in libraries are not being consulted on changes as they are changes for the worse, leaving staff to deal with the consequences.

The London Libraries Consortium has expanded the boroughs it covers. Library authorities involved can get a book from another library authority that is participating. The main criteria for entry is that the library authority has a comprehensive stock and it was understood that currently Croydon would not be admitted because of the poor book stock. Whether Carillion was really listening to the staff in Croydon libraries was seriously questioned.

Croydon Central Children's Library is often dirty and uncared for as it is rarely if ever staffed. Other floors at Central Library are unstaffed. The stock is poor and this extends across the service, with now empty book cases and stands removed in many libraries. There are queues at enquiry desks due to the limited number of staff, yet the self-serve machines often sit idle. A national library campaigner who is also an experience library worker has visited and branded Croydon Central library as the worst central library he has ever visited.

Libraries are a statutory service

Another person referred to the statutory duty to provide a library. This was confirmed to be the [1964 Museums and Libraries Act](#). Local authorities have a legal duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all who wish to make use of it. Local authorities have some leeway to interpret how the service is delivered.

Co-location of services

A person spoke about the [Ideas Stores in Tower Hamlets](#), merging libraries with adult learning and other services.

This worked extremely well, allowing residents to access or be referred to different services or support within the same space. It was noted though that Tower Hamlets had based this on extensive research and had designed purpose built buildings to deliver this. Ideas Stores offer one place to get all the information needed with good opening hours so more can access them. Virtually every library in Tower Hamlets is open between 8 and 10 hours a day, six days a week. This contrasts with Croydon where hours have been cut, reducing access.

Whereas Tower Hamlets appears to be an effective example of co-location it was known to be less successful elsewhere. The loss of the purpose built library in New Addington was given as an example. The old library had offered a large space, with good access, the adult area still giving good sight of the children's area allowing families to use the different areas but still keep sight of each other. There was room for people to read, chat, and to work with youth without disturbing other library users browsing, reading or studying. The library is now shoehorned into the Adult Education Centre (CALAT). In order to accommodate the library the CALAT Centre lost teaching space, including the Hair and Beauty training areas with specialist equipment, which taught courses that equipped people with skills to help them into employment. Basic literacy and numeracy classes were also impacted.

Branch Libraries

The smaller libraries in the communities cater for the needs of those communities. This sort of specialised offer would not be possible in a Central Library or a few hub libraries.

Doing it online

The Council are driving people online. It is really important to be able to access the internet within libraries which is another thing they deliver.

Charges

People generally were not aware of the charges now being made for using the internet in libraries. Time on library computers is now charged for after the first two hours. Things such as ordering books from another library are now free – you used to have to pay a fee. However, the system often doesn't work, as people have to wait for quite some time, sometimes never receiving reserved items. If the system did work, people would be able to access a wider range of books.

Promoting libraries/ offer in libraries

The events in libraries are being under-promoted. The booklets often come out after the start of the period covered and social media is very poor. Adult activities are being charged for which is hard on older people, the unemployed or those with reduced means.

Popular initiatives such as The Reading Agency's [Read Well](#) scheme, which is pitched at teenagers, is not available in our libraries although promoted in libraries run by other authorities.

Tim Coates

When Labour were in opposition they called on Tim Coates to advise them at a Labour meeting on libraries held during the last consultation process. Cllr Bashford was invited to this meeting as were local library campaigners. At this meeting Tim Coates noted the huge and disproportionate back office costs loaded onto the libraries budget.

Tim Coates had contacted Elizabeth Ash at the change of council administration. He was willing to come from the US at no cost to the Council to advise the new Labour administration on libraries. No reply to this offer was received from Cllr Timothy Godfrey or The Leader, Tony Newman.

Library service budget figures

Whilst it is useful to have links to relevant documents as part of the libraries engagement exercise, they left unanswered questions. The current budget, for example, shows just £21 for transport for the libraries for a year, which is very hard to explain.

Save Croydon Libraries Campaign

The campaign is an open informal group, like the majority of library campaigns, with people dipping in and out depending on current circumstances. Whether or not the campaign should be formalised was questioned but no conclusion drawn. It was noted that there were a small number of people agitating on social media, which made people less willing to identify themselves. If people want to pass information to the campaign they can. Names will not be disclosed without consent. Anyone can write a post for the campaign website, whatever their view, as long as it is relevant to libraries and the campaign.

Conclusion

Everyone was encouraged to fill in the survey, either in hard copy or online, or respond in another way. It was suggested that a note of comments were kept and these could be passed to the campaign, in confidence.

It was explained that notes of the meeting are produced. The draft is circulated to the key speakers first and then to all others attending for comment prior to finalising them for publication. All attendees would then receive the final notes and these will be posted on the CCC website.

A member of the audience asked for a vote of thanks to be noted for CCC calling the meeting and for Elizabeth's work on the local campaign.

Donations to support the work of CCC were welcomed and [details of membership](#) were made available.

Next meeting

The next meeting is being planned. Details shortly.

Meeting closed: 9pm

Email: CroydonNeighbourhoods@gmail.com

Website: [CCC website](#)

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