

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO:	Cabinet
DATE:	16 December 2024
SUBJECT:	Library Services consultation
LEAD MEMBER:	Cllr Puja Bedi – Lead Member for Education and Children’s Services
CHIEF OFFICER:	Sue Butcher – Executive Director – Children’s
CONTACT OFFICER:	Neil Hoskinson – Director of Education
WARD(S):	All
KEY DECISION:	YES
EXEMPT:	NO
DECISION SUBJECT TO CALL IN:	NO, subject to call in being waived to allow consultation to commence immediately after Cabinet decision, with opportunity for scrutiny during consultation process.
APPENDICES:	Appendix 1 – Library performance data Appendix 2 – Consultation Overview Appendix 3 – Equalities Impact Assessment

1 Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, the Council has a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. The Council runs its own library services across four main buildings with no mobile service. The staffing resource for the service has reduced over the past few years, resulting in a reduction in staffed hours and increase in self-service hours.
- 1.2 Guidance and case law has determined that if any changes are made to how a library service is delivered, the council must follow a fair process, and this includes considering local needs and working with the public when devising a new way of delivering services.

Recommendations:

Cabinet is requested to:

- a. Approve the proposed future operating model for Library Services for the purpose of consultation.
- b. Approve public consultation on the future delivery of library services for a period of 10 weeks from 17 December 2024.
- c. Note that a report will be brought back to Cabinet in Quarter 4 of 2024/25 recommending a proposal for the future delivery of library services.

Reason:

The Council has a statutory duty to provide a library service, however it can take into account local circumstances in determining how to deliver that service and must do so in a way that meets its other statutory duties, including in relation to best value and to set a balanced budget.

Commissioner Review

Commissioners have reviewed this report and have no specific comments to add.

1.3 Options considered

Option	Description
Option 1- Continue with current service	<p>To provide library services from 4 locations (The Curve, Langley, Britwell and Cippenham), with current opening and self-service hours. A one off saving on the publications budget was delivered in 2024/25, meaning any further saving would mean no new fiction or non-fiction for adults, no ebooks or e-resources and only limited spend on children’s material for a two year period. The saving in the current MTFS in relation to staffing would not be delivered.</p> <p>This option is not recommended.</p>
Option 2 – Maintain library services in Britwell and The Curve buildings and close Cippenham and Langley library buildings	<p>The library service is not dependent on specific buildings. The Council has sought to maintain the service over four buildings, but a reduced budget has resulted in a reduction in opening hours and staffed hours. The Council’s new accommodation arrangements see Observatory House, The Curve and Britwell maintained as the key operational sites for public facing services. This means there is no operational need for Cippenham or Langley Libraries for other service delivery, which was an option consulted on in the original operating model agreed in 2022 and reviewed in 2023.</p> <p>This option would deliver savings to the building management budget if both buildings were closed and allow the Council to consider disposal of the sites to receive a capital receipt.</p> <p>This option also allows the existing staff and publication budget to be spread across two buildings as opposed to four and utilise the limited resource for outreach to meet community needs.</p> <p>This option is recommended for consultation.</p>
Option 3 – Reduce publication budget to deliver further savings	<p>The Council has already significantly reduced its publications budget. In 2020/21 the budget was £220,000 and the current budget was £90,000. A one-off saving of £40,000 was offered in 2024/25 to address an in-year budget gap across the Council. Any further reduction is likely to only be on a one-off basis and will result in a reduction in purchase of books for children and adults, including no spend on multicultural books and a reduction in spend on ebooks/e-audio, which was an intended growth area in the Library Service Plan.</p> <p>Any further permanent reduction in the publications budget risks not fulfilling the statutory duty to deliver a comprehensive and</p>

	<p>efficient library service in relation to the keeping of adequate stocks, sufficient in number, range and quality and to meet any special requirements of adults and children.</p> <p>This option is not recommended.</p>
<p>Option 4 – Reduce staffing budget to deliver further savings</p>	<p>The service has 2 full-time library assistant vacant posts. Recruitment is on hold and removing the posts would deliver a saving of £60,000.</p> <p>The impact of not filling the vacancies is additional pressure on existing staff to maintain opening and activities programme. However, a staffing restructure across the Education service may alleviate this pressure. If the service reduced to two buildings, it may be easier to manage the reduction.</p> <p>This option is recommended for consultation.</p>

2 Report

2.1 Library services are a statutory service delivered by local authorities under the legal duty described in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. This duty requires councils to deliver a “comprehensive and efficient” library service.

Service plan and needs assessment

2.2 The Council approved a library service plan for 2022 to 2027 in March 2022. This was informed by a detailed needs assessment and large-scale public consultation. The following high-level aims are set out in the service plan:

Priority 1: Improved literacy and love of reading for all residents

Priority 2: Affordable services available to all users

Priority 3: Levelling up opportunities for all residents

2.3 The service plan recommended the following aims and these have been analysed against the current service. Appendix 1 contains further detail on the performance against the needs assessment and service plan priorities:

- **High quality support for adults and children to support literacy and encourage a love of reading for pleasure.**
- The reduction in library hours and staffing, as well as a planned reduction to the publication budget had understandably impacted on the level of support that can be provided. As shown in Appendix 1, the overall budget has reduced from £1.5m in 2019 to £757,000 in 2024, including a 59% reduction in the publications budget and a 57% reduction in library assistants. Whilst books for children and young people have more wear and tear and need to be replaced more often to prioritise a reduced publication budget on this group, meaning that for at least one year, there will be no new books for adults.
- **Make sure the right library services are delivered in the right way in the right locations ensuring that the physical building spaces and events are fully accessible, supporting those with additional needs.**

The existing building spaces are accessible in a physical sense, however the reduced opening hours and reduced service offering in each building, mean the service offered in each location has been reduced. This also spreads a small library team across multiple buildings and limits opportunities to

undertake outreach work in communities. The needs assessment flagged the need to focus on the Library at Home service to meet the needs of those who cannot attend a building based service. There is currently no mobile library service, no opening in the evenings and no opening on Sundays. The library footfall has reduced significantly across all sites since 2019. The data for Britwell and the Curve on footfall captured those who attend the medical centre and other services in the Curve and do not therefore capture those who only are using library services. Britwell library services are only staffed by library staff one Saturday a month with the rest of the time self-service and Cippenham and Langley are open for nearly 50% less hours than in 2019. The overall opening hours have reduced from 203 in 2019 to 103 in 2024.

- **Encourage residents of all ages to make use of our library service to improve their wellbeing and personal development.**

The library service continues to offer events, although these are mainly aimed at children.

- **Increased range and diversity of on-line resources and support for residents to use these virtual resources, making sure that no resident is excluded from accessing the on-line world.**

The budget for IT and computer software has reduced from £85,000 in 2019 to £56,000 in 2024, a 34% reduction. In addition the amount spent on e-resources has reduced from 2020/2021. In 2024/25 due to a saving being offered up which will have the effect of further reducing the amount spent on e-materials.

- **A range of exciting, relevant, and enjoyable events hosted by library services.**

The service has continued to deliver a high number of events and the Summer Reading Challenge, however events delivery is very low in Britwell due to the service being offered on a predominantly self-service basis and events at all sites have reduced compared to previous years. Each site continues to have a programme of regular weekly story and rhyme sessions and a holiday programme of activities, which are popular and regularly attract significant numbers of children and carers/parents. The detail of events and Summer Reading Challenge attendance and cost are in Appendix 1.

- **Increased opportunities for volunteering in our library service and highly professional volunteers working with all library users.**

As part of the consultation in 2022, 300 respondents stated they would value the opportunity to become volunteers in the library service, however this did not translate into actual volunteers, despite staff contacting all those respondents. From 300 possible volunteers a total of 3 eventually committed to volunteering. Staff have devoted time and resource into attracting volunteers, including via the SCVS, however since 2022 only 10 volunteers have been recruited. The service currently has 41 volunteers delivering 656.25 hours.

- **Improved collection and use of data to make sure our decisions are based on evidence.**

The performance data is contained in Appendix 1, however there are issues with capturing footfall data, as Britwell and the Curve captures data for all those who enter the building, regardless of whether they are using the library. The library service is working with the Insight team to review and revise KPI data collection to better support evidence based decision making.

- **Strong engagement with residents to help us shape the service and promote events, activities, and library resources.**

A comprehensive consultation was undertaken in 2022 to inform the Library Service Plan. This identified the following key findings:

- The library service is highly valued by library members.
- More than 80% of library transactions take place through self-service kiosks.
- 70% of all items issued (hard copy) are from the children's library.
- Respondents like the idea of co-locating other Council services with the current library buildings.
- Young People value study space
- Our on-line service is growing but is not widely known about.
- The library service should consider the diverse needs of the population, including use of the library at home service, the availability of materials for residents for whom English is not a first language and the options of outreach work.

Whilst co-location was considered popular, the service has been unable to attract third parties, including other public sector bodies to co-locate, with the exception of the medical centre at Britwell. The Council has reviewed its customer service and public facing service offering and is intending to rationalise the number of physical locations for delivery, focusing on Observatory House, The Curve and Britwell. Feasibility studies are to be commissioned to identify options for these buildings. The reduction in publications budget limits opportunities to invest in e-resources and materials for those for whom English is a second language.

- **We provide and spend a publications budget in line with councils in our most similar group and review our building opening times to ensure value for money**

The building opening times and staffed hours have reduced across all sites, but significantly in Britwell, Cippenham and Langley. The publications budget has also reduced so the Council is in line but to the bottom quartile across statistical neighbours. The one off reduction in 2024/25 means the Council has spent significantly less on publications than other councils in our most similar group. Appendix 1 shows the Council's net spend and book fund per 1000 of the population, which shows the Council's book fund per 1000 of the population to be lower than other Berkshire authorities and Brighton, Southampton and the Isle of Wight.

Background to changes to service model

- 2.4 The service model was changed in 2022 to provide a reduced hours library service from 4 buildings within the Borough and to reduce the library publication budget to collectively deliver a saving whilst still meeting the needs to the local population. There was a need to test the assumptions made in terms of shared building use and income generation and therefore the model, particularly in terms of building use, was agreed on an interim basis for 12 months.
- 2.5 In February 2023 the Council reviewed the library service against the strategic aims and priorities. It considered the ongoing financial sustainability issues and determined that it needed to move to a predominantly self-service library service if the service was to be maintained across the 4 buildings. There was to be a concerted effort put into recruitment of volunteers in addition to exploring options to

external funding. Members considered the option of closing Cippenham Library, which would deliver additional savings of £70,000 per annum by closing the building and the potential of a capital receipt, but decided not to proceed with this. At the time the Council had not made a decision on its future accommodation strategy.

- 2.6 It was accepted that the proposal adopted in 2023 was dependent on other services being present in the buildings, including that building management, customer service and housing needs would continue to locate staff at the Britwell Hub. the library building can only be opened on a self-service basis when other services are present in the building The issues with opening of Langley Library and Cippenham Library were flagged in that for Langley and for Cippenham the library building can only be opened when library staff are in attendance as no other services run from the building.
- 2.7 Despite responses from consultation indicating that service users would appreciate evening and Sunday opening, The Curve is the only building with library services open until 6pm and only once a week and there are no Sunday openings.

Current performance

- 2.8 In July 2023, Cabinet received a report on performance. This demonstrated the following:
- that the opening times were being achieved by library staff working flexibly across all sites, including some staff moving between sites each day.
 - The performance for number of people visiting library buildings had fallen significantly below that achieved in the financial year prior to the Covid pandemic. In addition there was no data to indicate whether visitors were visiting for the library service or for other services run from the buildings.
 - For books borrowed, due to the total opening hours being reduced by 36% in 2023/24 compared to 2019/20 the target was reduced by 36%. As data was only over 2 months, it was too early to demonstrate the long term use of the libraries for book borrowing.
 - In 2019/20 a total of 57 volunteers supported the library service, 3 supporting Library at Home and 54 the Summer Reading Challenge. This delivered 1000 volunteer hours. Limited volunteer hours had been delivered in April and May 2023 with plans in place to increase the number of volunteers.
 - Library buildings, with the exception of Britwell, hosted several events each with a focus on activities for children. The Summer Reading Challenge was delivered at reduced cost per participant in 2022.
 - Attracting new members has a reduced target compared with 2019/20 to reflect the 36% reduction in opening hours across the service.
- 2.9 Over the past 12 months there have been further changes to the delivery of services, including plans for customer services to be delivered from less delivery points, challenges in recruitment to library staff and a review of the main public delivery sites for Council services. This allows consideration for how these three main delivery sites – Observatory House, The Curve and Britwell – can be utilised. Investment in these buildings to make them more suitable for service delivery will require savings from elsewhere. It is therefore appropriate to review the needs assessment completed in 2021 and test the current model against this. The detail on performance against the needs assessment and service plan priorities is contained in Appendix 1.

Proposal

- 2.10 The recommended proposal is to consult on closing Cippenham and Langley library buildings and to re-design the service offering across The Curve and Britwell with a staffing resource reflecting the removal of two vacant posts.

Consultation process

- 2.11 There will be a public consultation for 10 weeks from Tuesday 17 December 2024 to Tuesday 25 February 2025 on the preferred option. All respondents will be asked to complete an on-line survey either on their own IT equipment or using the publicly available IT at libraries. There will be a number of virtual and face-to-face consultation events held at library buildings for residents to attend. Information and guidance will also be available at the library buildings. In addition, there will be a number of stakeholder events (on-line and face-to-face) to encourage participation from partners ranging from schools and nurseries to community and special interest groups and other council services.
- 2.12 The results of the consultation will be brought back to Cabinet in Spring 2025 for consideration and a decision about what changes will be implemented to ensure our library service remains comprehensive, efficient, and affordable.

3. Implications of the Recommendation

3.1 Financial implications

3.1.1 The available budget for library services is split across different services as the cost of staffing and other resources sit with the library service and the cost of maintaining the buildings within the property team. The library service budget (excluding property costs) is £757,000. This is made up of £90,000 for publications, £56,000 for IT and computer software and the remainder on staffing. The library service is currently operated from four buildings. Any decision to close a building would bring building-based savings including repairs, maintenance, business rates, insurance, utility costs and facilities officer's time. Indicative building management costs are set out in the table below.

Location	Maintenance and running costs	FO Costs and Mgmt. Fee	Business Rates	IT Asset Costs	Utilities (Gas, Electricity and Water)	Income	Total
Langley Library	£16,188	£4,255	£25,200	£11,997	£14,729	£0	£86,124
The Curve	£76,613	£61,345	£463,360	£44,241	£224,396	£85,998	£734,715
Britwell Hub	£32,994	£44,448	£69,120	£12,157	£68,777	£339,840	£112,344
Cippenham Library	£19,797	£4,255	£18,220	£11,977	£7,575	£0	£48,854

3.1.2 The potential savings from the proposed model is £60,000 in staffing (vacant positions) and £134,978 in building costs, making a total of £194,978. Any proposal to close building will be subject to a project plan that will profile the delivery of building savings over a 12 month period including associated risk. Should a decision be taken to proceed, implementing the changes will require a six month lead-in time This will be reflected in the 2025/26 budget and monitored accordingly. The staffing saving is deliverable as the posts are currently vacant.

3.1.3 If a decision is made to close Cippenham and Langley library buildings and declare them surplus to requirements, the Council could consider disposal of these buildings to generate a capital receipt.

3.2 Legal implications

3.2.1 Library services are provided under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, section 10 of which places a duty on the library authority to provide a: “comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof”. Further detail is provided in the Act as follows:

library authority shall in particular have regard to the desirability—

(a) of securing, by the keeping of adequate stocks, by arrangements with other library authorities, and by any other appropriate means, that facilities are available for the borrowing of, or reference to, books and other printed matter, and pictures, gramophone records, films and other materials, sufficient in number, range and 2 quality to meet the general requirements and any special requirements both of adults and children; and
(b) of encouraging both adults and children to make full use of the library service, and of providing advice as to its use and of making available such bibliographical and other information as may be required by persons using it.

3.2.2 Case law has interpreted what a “comprehensive and efficient” library service may mean in practice. This includes confirming that it does not mean that every resident lives close to a library, instead meaning that the service is accessible to all residents using reasonable means, including digital technologies. As efficient service should make best use of the assets available in order to meet its core objectives and vision, whilst recognising the constraints on council resources. Any decision about the library service should be embedded within a clear strategic framework which draws on evidence about needs and aspirations across the diverse communities of the area. The availability of resources is highly relevant to the question of what constitutes a comprehensive and efficient library service and where reductions are required due to a financial crisis, whether on a local or national level, this should be considered in any review of library services.

3.2.3 The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) has published guidance, which should be considered and followed. The guidance makes clear that a comprehensive and efficient library service will differ between councils and will depend on the needs of each area. It is the role of councillors and local officials to determine how much they spend on libraries and how they manage and deliver their services, but this must be done:

- In consultation with their communities
- Through analysis of evidence around local needs
- In accordance with their statutory duties (these being wider than the specific duty set out above and including wider statutory duties, including duties under the Equality Act and best value duties)

3.3 Risk management implications

3.3.1 If no changes are made to how our library services are delivered there is a significant financial risk to the council as the Council is not currently operating on a financially sustainable basis.

3.3.2 If a fair and transparent decision-making process (including a public consultation) is not followed there is a significant legal risk to the council which could lead to a “minded to” letter being issued by the Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport. Ultimately this could lead to the council needing to defend Judicial Review proceedings.

3.4 Environmental implications

3.4.1 Carrying out a review of library services and a consultation on future delivery does not have any direct environmental implications.

3.5 Equality implications

3.5.1 A detailed Equality Impact Assessment considering possible changes to the delivery of library services is attached. This EIA will be refreshed and reviewed in light of the feedback received as part of the public consultation.

3.6 Workforce implications

3.7.1 Carrying out a review of library services and a consultation on future delivery does not have any direct workforce implications. There are vacancies in the structure, which are not currently being recruited to whilst the review is being undertaken. Staff already work across multiple sites and therefore there would be no change to their terms and conditions by requiring them to work across less sites.

3.8 Property implications

3.8.1 The proposed new operating model for libraries has property implications. If buildings are no longer deemed necessary for library service delivery, they can be released to consider alternative use or disposal.

4. **Background Papers**

None