



The Future of Barnet Libraries

Key issues for options consultation



**European Services
Strategy Unit**

(Continuing the work of the Centre for Public Services)



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Executive summary

The three options for the future of the library service exclude in-house provision. The 'Community leadership of libraries' option is in practice an outsourcing option, because only four small libraries will be offered to be community operated, whilst core libraries will be outsourced to a social enterprise or private contractor.

Case for in-house provision

There are five important reasons why an in-house option should be part of the options appraisal - long-term future of the library service will be more secure and sustainable; to retain skilled and experienced staff; avoid procurement and transaction costs; maintain the quality of employment such as terms and conditions, pensions, health and safety and to tackle inequalities and social exclusion; investment in the library estate will have to be borne by the Council and will ultimately be cheaper and most effective in-house; and to avoid the risk of contractor and/or market failure.

Risks unstated

The Council has failed to identify the full range of significant risks, which are inherent in the library strategy. We identify seven additional risks where the Council has failed to identify the risks in failing to achieve income targets from letting space/increased charges; under-estimating the cost of managing the increased number of volunteers; the risk of failing to deliver the statutory service or reduced quality; the risk of contractor or market failure (very limited private or non-profit experience in operating public libraries).

'Open' library project

This project has the potential to lead to unnecessary job losses, place the public and remaining staff at risk and lead to the lowering of the quality of service. We provide a long list of important questions regarding security, health and safety and operational issues.

UNISON request details on how the technology would work and who would be responsible for its maintenance. Recent months have seen staff and public ICT provision deteriorate. What are the guarantees that this technology for unstaffed hours would be adequate and properly maintained?

Volunteering and Community involvement

UNISON members report that they spend a disproportionate amount of time interviewing, training and supervising volunteers in comparison to the hours worked. Volunteers in libraries must be used as an auxiliary to staff and not their replacement.

Consultation

The library workforce must also be fully consulted. It is also essential that the composition of the working group to examine the mutual option is truly representative of the workforce, and that all members of the groups' input is given fair consideration.

Recommendations

1. Barnet UNISON strongly recommends that in-house provision is included in each option.
2. It is essential that a comprehensive risk register is compiled immediately and forms part of the public and staff consultation so that the risks can be fully understood in assessing the options.
3. Assurances are required to both the public and staff that the wider role of volunteers is only a short-term measure.
4. A full equality impact assessment is undertaken to identify the effect of the Library options and the operational proposals.

The Future of Barnet Libraries

The London Borough of Barnet has produced three options for public consultation on the future operation of its Library Service. This report examines some of the key issues.

It is UNISON's initial response and will be subject to amendment following further consultation with our members and clarification of issues raised below.

Impact of spending cuts

Savings target of £2.5m between 2016 and 2020 (four financial years) or £625,000 per annum plus £352,000 already agreed for 2015-2016. Thus the annual for saving for the 2016-2020 period will be £977,000 per annum or 21.5% cut on the 2014-2015 Library budget. Increased income generation could reduce the level of staffing, building and stock changes required.

There are currently 101.82 FTE (150 posts – 73 full time and 77 part time staff. A 21.5% budget cut could mean a loss of 32.25 posts or more depending on the proportion of staff cuts in the options (see below).

The limited options

The Council has drawn up three options for public consultation before a preferred option is submitted to the Children's, Education, Libraries and Safeguarding Committee on 28 April 2015.

Option 1: Maintain the full reach of the existing library network. The existing library network would be maintained, but focused on four 'core' libraries – Chipping Barnet, Hendon and two new libraries at Church End and Colindale. Other libraries would reduce in size to about 540 sq.ft. Opening hours would increase by 50% across the network. Libraries would be outsourced to an employee or community owned mutual, community trust or private contractor.

Annual impact compared to current service:

	Staff	Buildings	Stock	Income
Proportion of total savings	68%	5%	11%	16%

Option 2: Maintain the depth and quality of service provision within a consolidated library network. Eight libraries – the four 'core' libraries in Option 1 plus East Barnet, Edgware North, Finchley and Golders Green would form a consolidated library network. Full range of activities and staffed for 60% of current opening hours and provide access to 95% of Barnet population within 30 minutes. Libraries would be outsourced to an employee or community owned mutual, community trust or private contractor.

Annual impact compared to current service:

	Staff	Buildings	Stock	Income
Proportion of total savings	55%	11%	8%	26%

Option 3: Community leadership of libraries. East Finchley, Mill Hill, South Friern and Edgware would be offered to be run as community libraries, but reduced in size to approximately 540 sq.ft., as would the Burnt Oak library. The East Barnet and Childs Hill libraries would close. Eight libraries – Hendon, Burnt oak, Chipping Barnet, Church End, Golders Green, Colindale, North Finchley and Osidge would provide the core statutory library network and staffed for 50% of current opening hours. Libraries would be outsourced to an employee or community owned mutual, community trust or private contractor.

Annual impact compared to current service:

	Staff	Buildings	Stock	Income
Proportion of total savings	65%	7%	9%	19%

Commentary on the options

All three options require “...a new provider to run the rest of the library service, either through a mutual, charitable trust or similar structure, or through an outsourced contract arrangement” with the Hendon library managed by a partnership with an educational institution (Library Options Paper, 2014).

The Library Equality Analysis document section on the use of alternative providers states:

“Initial assessment of the various possibilities for alternative delivery of libraries suggests that a community or staff-owned mutual or outsourced delivery model would offer the potential for service improvements as well as achieving additional savings, either through economies of scale or through greater potential for innovation and for mobilising volunteers and other additional capacity.”

Yet no evidence is provided in any of the documentation about the source of the “additional savings”. Neither are the “greater potential for innovation”, “for mobilising volunteers” and “other additional capacity” statements explained.

They are little more than a wish list to distract public attention from the stark scale of the cuts and reduction in the quality of Barnet’s library service.

The draft options report refers to “A new delivery model for libraries. This could be an employee or community owned mutual, a community trust or similar or an outsourced provider” (para 9.1). Thus all three options exclude in-house provision.

The ‘Community leadership of libraries’ option is in practice an outsourcing option because only four small libraries will be offered to be community operated whilst core libraries will be outsourced to social enterprise or private contractor.

Each option is also dependent on “a greater role for volunteers to enhance the service provided in libraries” (para 9.1). They may enable a more extensive service to be provided in comparison to the level of service that the Council is willing to fund, but this can only be considered a short-term measure.

The development of the mutual option is described as “...over the next three months work will be done with the management team to develop a business plan **demonstrating viability**” (our emphasis). This statement appears to assume that a mutual will be viable when in fact many difficult organisational, operational and financial matters have to be considered before it may be considered a viable option by staff, library users and the Council.

Why in-house provision should be included in the options

There are five important reasons why an in-house option should be part of the options appraisal:

Firstly, the long-term future of the library service is more secure and sustainable if provided in-house by the Council. It has more flexibility to respond to changing needs and circumstances and to improve the scope and quality of services once the current financial conditions are removed and the service is not constrained by contractual arrangements.

Secondly, in-house provision is key to retain skilled and experienced staff to provide a good quality and responsive service to library users.

Thirdly, this option avoids the procurement and transaction costs associated with outsourcing or creating new organisation.

Fourthly, it provides the best opportunity to maintain the quality of employment such as terms and conditions, pensions, health and safety and to tackle inequalities and social exclusion.

Fifthly, investment in the library estate will have to be borne by the Council and will ultimately be cheaper and most effective if it undertaken directly by the Council.

Finally, it avoids the risk of contractor and/or market failure including the costs and disruption associated with such failure.

Risks under-stated

The five risks cited in section 5.4 of the Libraries Strategy report fail to identify the full range of significant risks, which arise directly from the options considered. The five risks could have significant operational and financial issues, but there are several other risks with the potential impact that should be included in the risk register:

- Cuts in staffing levels make it extremely difficult to deliver the statutory service at the required standard.
- Ability to generate additional income by letting space in library buildings and/or income from increased charges could fall significantly short of expectations. This could lead to further cuts in services and jobs. Income generation targets are notoriously over-optimistic and the Council has limited control over the scale and timing of the take-up of space and the flow of rental income. Furthermore, the Council should give assurances that any commercial venture allowed to operate these spaces will not be inappropriate or detrimental to the remaining Library Service, or to the community.
- The costs of managing the increased number of volunteers is much higher than forecast in revenue budgets.
- Availability of suitable volunteers may fluctuate and decline in changed economic conditions.
- The exclusion of in-house provision of the library service in all three options may indicate that the Council is expecting to implement changes to terms and conditions of employment. This would make it more difficult to recruit library staff and thus a risk in maintaining the quality of service.
- The financial and/or operational failure of a private or social enterprise contractor must be considered a risk, particularly since a social enterprise is likely to be a new organisation. Furthermore, the private sector has limited experience of operating public libraries.
- A social enterprise could be selected as the preferred option in the consultation process, but staff could conclude that they are prepared to accept the operational and financial conditions.

It is essential that a comprehensive risk register is compiled immediately and forms part of the public and staff consultation so that the risks can be fully understood in assessing the options.

‘Open’ Library project

UNISON has major misgivings over this option. It has the potential to lead to unnecessary job losses, place the public and remaining staff at risk and lead to the lowering of the quality of the Service

Further operational details of the unstaffed ‘Open Library’ project, including risk assessments, must be provided as a matter of urgency so that they are part of the consultation process. The Council must supply proof that the health and safety of the public and staff will not be adversely affected by the implementation of this pilot. Council property may be stolen or damaged. The Council justification for change in the Library Service is driven by the alleged need to make budget cuts, but the financial risk of this option seems not to have been fully considered.

UNISON shop stewards have identified a long list of important questions that arise from an unstaffed library, irrespective of the presence of CCTV cameras:

- Where does this leave safeguarding children and vulnerable adults?
- What happens if a member of the public is taken ill, collapses, or has an accident?
- What happens if someone is attacked?
- Will the building become a target for theft?
- What happens if there is a suspect bag or package?
- How will quarrels between members of public be resolved and prevented from escalating? (The risk of assault is a real, it is not uncommon for staff to come between people arguing over PCs for example. Such disputes have escalated to assault in other libraries, this risk is increased without staff).
- What happens if there is a flood, fire or electrical problem and the building is not safe?
- What happens if a group of noisy, rowdy people are disturbing other library users?
- Libraries and their staff provide a place of safety for vulnerable people, they will be put at risk in a staff-less building.
- How will fixtures and fittings be protected?
- What is there to prevent people just taking stock without issuing it?
- What happens when computers, printers and photocopiers break down and do not work?
- What happens when the printer or photocopier run out of paper? Or toilet paper and soap?
- How will print release be operated? There will have to be some method of putting charge on reader's ticket, because a lot of people will not pay for prints without it.
- What happens if heavy rain or snow may make access to the building unsafe, water logged or slippery?
- How will the supply of copying paper be controlled?
- Public having to use library card and pin number to get access goes against free open access too. Many people cannot remember their pin number so they will not be able to gain access.

A Health and Safety check of a large library revealed:

- No public evacuation fire plan visible in a number of rooms or areas, or poorly lit.
- No escape route signage in some areas.
- This library has an upper floor and a mezzanine level which are accessible to the disabled, In the event of an emergency people with disabilities will be at greater risk if libraries are unstaffed this will be true of all our libraries.

It is also vital that operational details of the Open Library pilot at Edgware Library are made available for the consultation process. These to include;

1. The Risk Assessments
2. Details of the technology to be installed
3. The Methodology for the alterations to the building and fixtures
4. The operational details of how the Library will function during the transformation
5. Operational details on how Library will function during the Pilot
6. Details on how the contract for the alteration work
7. Details on the contracts regarding the installation and maintenance of the technology required by the open pilot scheme
8. Details on the tendering of these contracts

Volunteering and Community involvement

UNISON members report that they spend a disproportionate amount of time interviewing, training and supervising volunteers in comparison to the hours worked. Details on the number of staff hours spent dealing with the volunteer programme and the resultant cost must be provided.

UNISON does not object in principal to the use of volunteers in Libraries, but this must be used as auxiliary to staff and not their replacement.

Reference is made to trained librarians. The 2013 library restructure resulted in the number of professional Librarian posts decline from 24.5 to 6, plus their line manager. All 6 posts have never been filled. At present 4.5 full time equivalent posts are filled one of whom is a temp whose employment will end in November).

Since April 2013 the Librarian posts have been unfilled below even this number and the line managers post was left vacant for over three months when the previous incumbent left for other employment. This does not display a commitment by the Council to maintain a professional librarian element in the Library Service. It is disingenuous of the Council to state that the implementation of the volunteering and community involvement option would not lower the number of “trained librarians”.

The health and safety issues raised by this option do not seem to have been considered by the Council. Further, the risk assessments for this option and the plans for training volunteers to operate libraries should be disclosed.

Library stock

The Draft Options paper states: *“If libraries are made smaller, the stock purchasing budget would be reduced accordingly so that the stock level was appropriate to the new level of storage space...”*

However, we question the validity of this proposal. The Council suggests reducing the physical size of a resource so they can reduce the stock that is needed. By this logic the Council could justify reducing the total stock level by closing all the Libraries. UNISON accepts the growing popularity of e-books etc., but they are an alternative and supplement to paper stock, not a replacement.

Use of technology

“...it is the Council’s intention that opening hours are extended through the use of technology for all libraries remaining open. The use of technology can now allow the Council to open and close a library without the need for any staff to be on site – the ‘open’ library. Visitors would access the library during unstaffed periods by scanning their library card and entering a PIN number. Once inside they would be able to use self-serve technology to borrow and return items, use computers, print and photocopy. CCTV would provide additional security.”

UNISON request details on how this technology would work and who would be responsible for its maintenance. Recent months have seen staff and public ICT provision deteriorate. What are the guarantees that this technology needed for unstaffed hours would be adequate in the first place and sufficiently maintained?

Public consultation and engagement

In recent months there have been significant problems with IT, both for public and staff. Online forms have not always been accessible and printers have often been out order. The Council’s consultation plans involve online and printed copies of the review document and survey being available at libraries. For the Consultation to be meaningful access to online or printed copies must be guaranteed.

The Survey is to be available in different formats, large print, and easy read and audio to users of the Home and Mobile Libraries. The whole Review document should be presented in these formats and available to all users and non-users of the Library Service.

The library workforce must also be fully consulted. It is also essential that the composition of the working group to examine the mutual option is truly representative of the workforce, and that all members of the groups’ input is given fair consideration.

Impact on jobs, terms and conditions

Staffing changes account for 55% - 68% of the total savings in the three options. The lower figure in Option 2 is also dependent on the highest level of income generation (26%). So while this option may initially appear to have the least impact on staffing it is accompanied by the higher risks associated with income generation noted above.

Recommendations

5. Barnet UNISON strongly recommends that in-house provision is included in each option.
6. It is essential that a comprehensive risk register is compiled immediately and forms part of the public and staff consultation so that the risks can be fully understood in assessing the options.
7. Assurances are required to both the public and staff that the wider role of volunteers is only a short-term measure.
8. A full equality impact assessment is undertaken to identify the effect of the Library options and the operational proposals.

Appendix

Elements common to all the options

The following elements of the existing service would be maintained:

- A mobile library service – maintained at current levels and used to ‘top up’ access to the library network for communities across Barnet.
- A home library service – maintained at current levels and used to ensure easy access to the library network for people with mobility issues.
- A Local Studies and Archives service – maintained at current levels.
- Support for adults, children and teenagers, including homework clubs and other activities – available in all staffed libraries.
- The Schools Libraries Resource Service – maintained at current levels, ensuring that school-based literacy activities for children and young people in the Borough continue to develop
- The early years service – maintained at current levels.

The following elements of the existing service would be expanded or developed:

- Improved self-service online technology – including existing ‘reserve and collect’ service making any book available to collect from any library now made available through new account service on Council website and delivered more efficiently using new Library Management System.
- e-books, e-audio and other online resources and learning materials – maintained at current levels or increased.

The options also assume:

- A new delivery model for libraries. This could be an employee or community owned mutual, a community trust or similar or an outsourced provider. It has also been assumed that a partnership with an educational institution would manage the Hendon branch, maintaining a smaller library on that site or nearby and allowing alternative use of some or all areas of the current building.
- Making use of opportunities to generate additional income. This would include increasing the use of facilities, potentially including meeting room hire, offering parking spaces for rent, collection points such as Amazon Lockers and businesses advertising in libraries and on the mobile library vehicle. It would also include some increases to fees and charges.
- A greater role for volunteers to enhance the service provided in libraries.
- Continued support to community libraries in Hampstead Garden Suburb and Friern Barnet.

(Source: Barnet Council – Library Options Paper, p29-30)

References

London Borough of Barnet (2014) Libraries Strategy, Report of Family & Community Well-being Lead Commissioner to Children, Education, Libraries and Safeguarding Committee, 28 October, <http://barnet.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s18680/Libraries%20Strategy.pdf>

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