The future of Croydon's libraries: consultation phase II

Response from the Croydon Conservative Council Group

The future of Croydon's libraries is under threat as a direct result of the council's bankruptcy, following years of mismanagement by Croydon Labour.

The council are consulting on three options:

- Reduce service hours by 21% across the borough
- Outsource all libraries
- Hybrid – reduction in service hours (two days per week) to eight libraries and five community-run libraries

This document sets out the Croydon Conservative Council Group's response to the consultation.

General / overall feedback

The consultation has lost the public's confidence

- There is a strong sense that the consultation will make no difference to the final decision. In the first phase of the consultation, an option to close five libraries was put on the table. This has now been removed as it will not deliver the necessary savings.

- It is welcome that this option is off the table. But it is not at all clear why the numbers weren't crunched properly ahead of phase one.

- Many residents fear that the idea was to scare people with a "worst-case scenario". This would then make the eventual decision look more palatable.

- Others simply believe it is indicative of a council that has still failed to gain a grip on the borough's finances.

- Either way, it has undermined public confidence in the process.

- The Council has repeatedly run consultation exercises that make no difference to the end result. This consultation follows only a short time after the last major consultation in 2019 with the report by Red Quadrant.

The consultation lacks stated objectives and vision for the library service

- The council has failed to set out a clear vision for what it wants its library service to achieve.

- Different people want different things from a library.

- At one end of the scale, some want an academic research service and access to professional librarians.

- At the other end, a library can serve as a community hub.

- It can, of course, also be anything in between.

- The report from the first consultation includes a summary of what residents' value, but there is nothing that sets out *what the council seeks to prioritise and preserve.*

- The council is not clear what its priorities for the future of libraries across Croydon are. As such, it is impossible to judge whether any of the options achieve them.

Feedback on each of the options

Reduce service hours by 21% across the borough

- The paper is unclear as to what this reduction will mean for individual libraries.

- The paper says "*the reduction would be minimised in busier libraries, where possible.*" It is not clear which libraries this will be, to what extent the hours will be impacted and when each library will be open.

- Residents are being asked to comment on the feasibility of this option but they cannot meaningfully build a picture of how this change will impact their access.

- Para 6.3.4 says: "*By reducing opening hours there would be an overall reduction in weekly staffed operating hours of 270.5 hours, which is a 48% reduction. This would be mitigated by the introduction of additional unstaffed hours in neighbouring libraries, utilising Open + technology.*"

- This doesn't make sense in the context of this option. Why must they access an unstaffed service at a "neighbouring" library when these changes are meant to affect every library in the borough? Will Open+ technology only be available in some libraries? If so, this should be made clear. There also needs to be a clear timeframe for when Open+ will be implemented in this scenario.

Outsource all libraries

- This option does not contain sufficient detail. It is impossible from the information provided for residents to understand how their service will be impacted.

- Para 6.5.2 says, "*To operate the same level of service provided now the partner would need to make service efficiencies or generate income generation. This model has been tested through a preliminary analysis by Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) and, in their opinion, the savings target/income generation can be achieved.*"

- But it does not provide details of what these savings would mean. What would be the impact on opening times? Would it reduce the number of books and resources available?

- It is not clear how much scope the provider would have to generate additional income. How much of the building space would they be allowed to use for commercial purposes? What would the impact be for the building's ability to function as a library?

- For this option to be feasible it must achieve "*additional in-year savings in the libraries service*." (Para 6.5.3). This is vague to the point of being threatening. How can anyone assess whether this is a meaningful option without details of what those "savings" will be?

- It wasn't very long ago (2018) that the Council was celebrating bringing libraries back inhouse as they stated outsourcing doesn't work. Have they changed their mind? Or have they put an option on the table which they believe is bad for Croydon?

Hybrid (reduction in service hours (one day per week) to eight libraries and five community-run libraries)

- This proposal involves community groups taking responsibility for the five libraries initially earmarked for closure: Bradmore Green, Broad Green, Sanderstead, Shirley, South Norwood.

- But community groups do not feel they have sufficient information to decide if this is feasible for them.

- It is not clear that the business case for this option adds up. It identifies the fact that the council won't have to pay business rates on these buildings as a saving. But it isn't clear whether the community group would be expected to pay it.

- If so, is this realistic?

- If not, surely this just creates problems for the council elsewhere? They won't have to pay the rate, but nor will they receive it. There is little point in robbing Peter to pay Paul.

- The feasibility of this option depends on the council being able to find community partners. The document lists several potential partners. But some of those partners have plans which would involve taking the library out of its current building. This doesn't seem consistent with what it outlined in this action.

- As such, this list is flawed and it's difficult to be confident in the feasibility of this option.

- This option is further undermined by the speed with which the council expects community groups to have to move to achieve in-year savings. There can be much merit in transitioning to community-led provision. But it is challenging to do so in a moment of crisis.