

For a conversation on the future of Lewisham Libraries

Introduction

The changes that public libraries have seen in the last 20 years are staggering: nowhere more so than in Lewisham. But, while conscious of how far we have come, it's important to review our direction of travel.

Looking back to 2010 or even 2015, the country was just emerging from the financial crisis or in the depths of austerity. Things were tough for ordinary people but we still would not have predicted the events of the last 5 years in relation to the country, public services, and the international picture?

Therefore, looking forward 5 or even 10 years seems an incredible challenge. However, we have attempted to imagine our library service in 2030, considering that our expectation is that it will serve the political, public, and organisational expectations of the borough. We are planning for a future in which we are still immensely proud of our library service, and observers internationally will point to it as a model of good practice.

So, if we consider the library service in 2030:

- Which challenges did it respond to?
- What does it look like?
- And how did we get there?

This short paper is a brief, and initial, attempt to answer these questions, which – it is hoped – can be seen as the starting point of a conversation about the future of our libraries.

The Lewisham public library service now

When we think about public libraries, some stereotypes come to mind... These include both concepts and behaviours. We think dust, books, dark, and we think silence, absence of change, seriousness.

Lewisham has subverted the stereotypes creating a unique, powerful, dynamic **resource** that has the potential to build on itself to benefit others. We call it the **Lewisham Model**.

The Library and Information Service – **a statutory service** under the 1964 Act – has changed fundamentally in the last few years, from a very traditional and declining facility, to one that is in step with – and often substantially ahead of – its times. Lewisham libraries do

Hub Libraries

Catford
Deptford Lounge
Downham
Lewisham

Community Libraries

Blackheath (Age Exchange)
Crofton Park (Eco Communities)
Forest Hill (V22)
Grove Park (Eco Communities)
Manor House (V22)
New Cross (NX Learning)
Pepys (Eco Communities)
Sydenham (Eco Communities)
Torrison Road (Corbett Group)

Home Library Service

Archives & Local History Centre

all that you would expect a library to do, but they complement this with a lot more and using creative and new tools.

Since 2006, all the **library buildings** have had some refurbishment or located to new premises. Since then, Lewisham pioneered totally new approaches to delivering public library services introducing:

- **self-service** terminals for issuing and returning books
- introducing **Wi-Fi, apple macs**, as well as **PCs**, and
- an ever expanding range of **free online services** including eBooks, eAudio, and thousands of online newspapers and magazines, as well as other great online reference resources.

In 2008, the All Party Mayoral Commission on the Future of Libraries and Adult Education in Lewisham set the framework for a constructive and participative future, recognising libraries as a fundamental service that delivers “**unbiased access to information, learning, and works of the creative imagination**”.

The Commission also recognised the role that libraries have as public spaces, as **trusted, open, inviting spaces that empower residents as citizens**. In line with this, the Mayor agreed to the creation of three Library Hubs “which will **carry an enhanced role for face to face contact between the local authority and the public to support the digital by default agenda**”. This sets the tone for the future of the library provision as enablers of cultural, social, economic, and educational interaction.

The Library Service does this “with” the local community in a way that – according to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting – shows that Lewisham “engages well with the population when compared to the other authorities”¹. This is because Lewisham developed the innovative **Lewisham Model that builds on the community capacity of local third sector organisations to revitalise library buildings, introduce new services, and maintain public library provision** as well as additional community benefits.

The results of this imaginative approach to a much-loved service are visible in the **increase in visits, increased opening hours**, and in the **increased number of service points**. These indicators move counter to the national trends, proving that Lewisham broke the mould of cuts equalling reduction in services.

2009 – 2019 comparison

In the last 10 years the Library and Information Service has become one of the most efficient services the council provides and one of the most efficient in London.

The Service reduced its staff costs by 39% and overall costs by 39%. Costs per opening hours went down by 50% and costs per head of population reduced by 47%.

Visits increased by 13% and opening hours increased 21% while Lewisham’s population increased by 16%.

What does it mean? The Service’s staff cost £2.1M less per year. The whole Service costs over £2.4M less every year. Our libraries are open 131.5 hours more every week, while one hour of our work has decreased in cost from £180 to £79 per hour.

This Service used to cost £19.55 per resident per year. Now it costs £9.40/year. That is, each Lewisham resident accesses our services for 78 pence per month!

¹ CIPFAstats Comparative Profile 2016-2017

Lewisham is at the core of some national, regional, and local initiatives that often push the boundaries of service transformation and innovation. For example, Lewisham led the **London Library Consortium through a new procurement** that not only delivered efficiencies and better courier services for 16 London boroughs, but it set a mechanism that revolutionises the way libraries are charged for services, and built an infrastructure that allows partnership developments with the contractor, to the benefit of millions of library users in London. The contract brings increased benefits to all members of the Consortium as new members join.

In this context, Lewisham is a member of the **Strategy Group** of the London Library Consortium, which in March 2019 concluded the procurement and implementation of the largest library catalogue migration in history, moving from one library catalogue to a new one overnight, without any break in service delivery to the over 4 million citizens it serves, and offering free access to over 7 million books.

Lewisham is one of ten London Library Authorities that joined the British Library in a 3-years' long project to support fledgling businesses. The **Start-Up in London Libraries** offers a myriad of free resources, training opportunities, and support to new local entrepreneurs.

The Libraries have proved incredibly successful in conveying positive messages about **health and wellbeing** through programmes such as the Now Festival, the series of Health Lectures, continued collaboration with Public Health and Social Prescribing, Macmillan Cancer Support, The Reading Agency's "Reading Well" programme and more.

Libraries answer people's questions

Our libraries deal with ca. 260,000 enquiries per year, which means that ca. 20% of our time is spent dealing with people's queries. These could cover literally any topic, from finding a recipe to addressing a housing problem, from paying a council tax bill to signing up with a doctor, from buying a parking permit to borrowing a book.

The amazing thing is that – as a Reading Agency study demonstrated – library staff are **"the second most trusted public officials after the family doctor"**. So, often, even when another council office, or Job Centre Plus, or CAB, or website, provides people with information, they still come to the library and ask a question. People want reassurance, an alternative, unbiased point of view, they want someone they trust to watch over them as they deal with the enquiry themselves...

It may seem difficult to put a value to something like this, but we have. Every enquiry dealt with in a library costs £2.36 – whatever its time requirement.

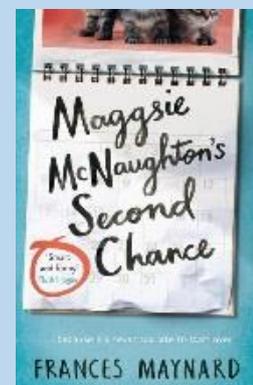
The Lewisham Library

Frances Maynard mentions Lewisham Library in her 2019 novel, "Maggsie McNaughton's Second Chance", which portrays a dyslexic woman serving a prison sentence and trying to make sense of the world on her release.

Here's a snippet:

TJ took me to Lewisham Library, end of last year. It's only five minutes from the flat. I'd never been to a library before. It looked a bit like a Job Centre, only stuffed with books. There were two floors of them and miles and miles of shelves. Took your breath away, looking at them. All those words....

...Now I'm reading a book at home on my own. Plenty of white space on the pages, thank God. If there's no white space in a piece of writing I'm done for. Mind you, the first couple of pages took me ages. I kept losing track of what had happened. But some of the words were the same. I kept going. Never thought I'd read a book."



Brief SWOT Analysis

<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths</p> <p>The library service has resilient, knowledgeable staff, great physical and ever growing digital collections. It has developed strong links to enterprising, passionate community partners. It is developing ground breaking library technology with partners in London and beyond. It thoroughly covers the Lewisham geography. It is there for residents 7 days / week, with the Hub Libraries open 80 hours/week. It is very, very cheap to run. Has been helping people with technology since 1995, and it is best placed to carry on and enhance this function as services move online.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses</p> <p>Staffing levels may be insufficient for the services that could be supported through libraries. Often expertise is simply lost as staff leave. Limited resources reflect on the Service's ability to match its ambition. The IT infrastructure is one of the Service's weakest points. Awareness of the Service and its capabilities, both at political and corporate levels.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <p>New developments in Lewisham and Catford, with the opportunity to refurbish the central library in Lewisham sooner and see a refurbished Catford within Laurence House. The new Library Management System and its development, which will bring interfaces with increasingly popular environments, such as SIRI, Alexa, etc. Supporting roles in housing, business development, and health.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <p>Reducing budgets. IT infrastructure. Buildings. Succession planning.</p>

What challenges did the service overcome by 2030?

The way in which reality will evolve in the next 10 years is a crystal-ball matter. But some trends jump out as particularly meaningful. The Social Market Foundation identifies six:

1. An ageing population that puts increasing pressure on social care and health services, but that brings new resources of its own through healthier pensioners.
2. More fragmented families, living in highly urbanised and more dispersed communities, with housing quality and affordability remaining a problem in some regions.
3. Prosperity driving higher expectations of public service quality and convenience, but growing disparities across regions and across generations demanding an adequate response.
4. Huge opportunities to apply innovations in technology and big data to improve the productivity of public services, alongside the task of managing the disruption to jobs that is likely to accompany this.
5. Localised environmental risks around flooding and air pollution to heighten, and the need for communities to display resilience.
6. Greater fiscal devolution presenting huge opportunities to councils to control their destiny as well as risks around the resilience of their local tax bases.

The Futures Company identifies nine:

1. *Population growth*
2. *An ageing population*
3. *Slow economic growth*
4. *Persistent levels of poverty*
5. *Maturing of the digital technology sector*
6. *Shifting values, towards autonomy and diversity, and away from authority and hierarchy*
7. *Continuing regional bias towards London*
8. *Increasing political fragmentation, reducing the dominance of the main political parties*
9. *Skills and materials shortages in housebuilding sector.*

Paraphrasing, these and many other experts point to a society that is increasingly polarised and fragmented by geography, by generations and by wealth. They imagine that the generational digital divide will fade, leaving cost as the major barrier to participation in the digital economy. They see “community” as a combination of physical and digital entity that is as valued as time and wellbeing. Finally, there is no indication that money and other resources will be more available than today for both households and governments.

Lewisham’s libraries in 2030 “deliver – in the physical and digital world – high-quality and unbiased access to information, learning, and works of the creative imagination. Lewisham libraries are open, trusted spaces of human interaction that are safe and welcoming to all. They work integrating local communities into their structures through the Lewisham Model”.

These future libraries deliver on people’s expectations as follows:

Corporate	Political	Public	Organisational
Libraries are one of the few places where quality face to face interaction between the council and the public happens at a mutually convenient time	Fiscal devolution may offer opportunities to strengthen the tax basis while supporting the most vulnerable.	Social care and health services for older residents are routinely accessed through on demand spaces available in libraries Social Prescribing is integral in the Service’s activities	Libraries are structured flexibly to accommodate a myriad of users and functions that change autonomously. E.g. an adult learning tutor delivering a course is empowered and able to configure the space to suit the required function
Libraries are integral to the planning and development of technological enhancement in service delivery.	The political will to fight persistent poverty in the borough may benefit from the libraries’ resources both physical and digital. Libraries are themselves a great leveller, where passion and necessity bring people together, for self and altruistic interest.	Libraries continue to play a vital role to support those whose housing quality limits their ability to pursue their interests or advance their work	Digital by default is certainly on the increase. As digital becomes “more digital” there may be a risk of leaving some behind.

Corporate	Political	Public	Organisational
Slow economic growth may act as a drag on development. Libraries may play an empowering role by enabling start-ups and low-cost businesses to flourish.	Moving away from authority and hierarchy implies a different approach to the role that the political plays on the corporate, the corporate on service, and the service on the individual. This may produce a flexible approach based on trust, autonomy and inclusiveness.	Libraries support people by raising awareness of environmental risks	The need for skills and resources that adapt to the requirements of the individual is likely to increase.
A growth mindset would be required to foster creativity and development in spite of reducing resources.	Political fragmentation may have scaled effects at national, regional and local levels.	Population growth will require venues that bring residents together as a community, are welcoming, trusted, and adaptable	Sufficient numbers of staff and volunteers collaborate to the success of the Service.
An entrepreneurial approach is instrumental in creating and implementing opportunities for growth.	The democratic process is likely to be increasingly self-directed and movement-based.	Aging and healthy residents might have disposable time and knowledge that can be capitalised upon to benefit all.	The Service is fully integrated into primary and secondary schools.

What does the service look like in 2030?

While it is difficult to describe what the Service will look like in 10 years' time, we could imagine that given the council's ambitions and the residents' expectations, many different levels of Service may be described, which have an impact on the resources they will need to remain sustainable.

Libraries are the first port of call for interaction between the public and the council. This could be to pay bills, purchase things online, get information or advice, etc. They are also opening and welcoming to people who do not have the resources at home to do what they want or need to do, in terms of IT, study space, access to books and other resources, etc.

In all cases, the Service should actively play a role in supporting colleagues across the council, including Housing, Customer Services, Adult Social Care and Health, Children Services, Business Support, and much more. How much the Service can contribute is directly dependent on the infrastructure and structure of the Service.

For the purpose of this paper we consider that the number of libraries will remain static between now and 2030 as there is significant support for maintaining current buildings. The development of future provision will need to take into account available resources and the profile of the service as a whole across the borough.

Our approach to developing the Service will be fundamentally based on

Maintaining the centrality of the written word to continue to foster the love of books and reading. While our book borrowing has decreased following national trends, we know that reading and literature appreciation is still central to our libraries' activities.

Recognising the value of our buildings as social spaces. This includes both the concentrated work (for studying, for research, business development, or quiet pursuit of personal interests) and the more social interaction (for creative and social pursuits,

entertainment or awareness raising, as well as wellbeing, meaningful daytime activities, including playing an active role in the prevention agenda with the potential to help reduce demand on statutory services through targeted interactions and services).

Investing and supporting council library staff and partners in the community libraries.

It is essential that all those involved in supporting library users are informed, skilled, and supported by the correct knowledge, infrastructure, and equipment.

Developing new and innovative partnerships. As noted above Libraries represent a trusted, welcoming and accessible public space which the public look to, to provide a whole range of information and services. A modern library services needs to build on this reputation to provide access to a broader range of provision and can ultimately represent the 'universal front door' for Council services and a place where people can be supported to resolve a significant range issues.

Improving the customer experience. While satisfaction with our libraries is at an all-time high, we expect much more from the Service and would set ambitious targets to deliver the best customer experience in our buildings and online. This includes integrating the library presence in buildings and online, and increasing its accessibility across the board.

Each of the approaches above would therefore contribute – at different levels – to increase:

- Accessibility usage of our physical and digital services
- financial sustainability
- satisfaction in the Service and the Council as a whole
- reduced demand for other services
- usage of our resources (e.g. as measured through Collection HQ, etc.)
- online presence and activity (e.g. as measured on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)
- sustainability through multiple income streams and decreased costs
- integration of libraries in sense of place activities
- usage by citizens who are supported and enabled to help themselves to live full and independent lives
- use of library resources and infrastructure to flexibly collocate services

However, as with many services, libraries are resource intensive and require adequate investment across a number of areas including staffing, technical support in areas such as IT and capital spend on both buildings and wider infrastructure.

The level of investment in the Library Service over the next ten years will determine how far the offer to the public can realise the potential outlined above. This paper, therefore, stops short of setting a vision for that future but rather outlines what is possible. It is hoped that this is the beginning of the conversation regarding the future of our Library Service. A conversation that is open, wide ranging and includes all of Lewisham residents and results in a shared, and deliverable, strategy for the future of libraries in the borough.