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Agenda Item 5

Dear Cllr. Mallory, Chair of Lewisham Public Accounts Committee,

I would like to request that a statement be tabled at the Public Accounts Select Committee meeting tonight, 7 November, 2018 7.00 pm, and that I could be granted permission to speak on this statement at tonight's meeting. The statement concerns budget cuts proposals: **COM 11 Hub Libraries cuts to staffed opening hours**, which have been added to section 3.28 of tonight's supplementary agenda as a result of the outcome of a vote on this matter at the Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee meeting on Monday 5th November 2018.

I posed my initial statement to the SSCSC and have as yet received no written response from any councillors or senior officers on my concerns. Head of Cultural and Community Development Liz Dart verbally defended the COM 11 budget cuts proposals the SSC Committee members present did not deem her response sufficient to dismiss my concerns and hence referred it on to PAC. **I argue that it is essential that this urgent matter is referred up to Mayor and Cabinet so council officers can formally address my concerns and the council be held accountable in its statutory duties.** My argument is elaborated in the statement below.

I write this statement from several pertinent subject positions of expertise:

- as a long-term Lewisham resident and library user (SE6, Catford South);
- as a former Librarian employed by Lewisham Library and Information Service (2016-17);
- as a Lecturer at Goldsmiths College with a recent sociology doctorate on the topic of the negative implications of cuts to public library services for UK society (a thesis which includes London Borough of Lewisham as an empirical case study); and
- as a member of the Save Lewisham Campaign group, on behalf of whom I am writing with this statement.

It is proposed that £450,000 is cut from the library service budget via one of two implementation methods:

Option 1) – remove library staff from Downham and Deptford making these self-service facilities with occasional support from the peripatetic team.

Option 2) – reduce staffed opening hours across Downham, Deptford and Lewisham by 45% from 64 hours per week to 35 hours per week. The buildings would remain open on a self-service basis outside those hours, although access in Lewisham would be restricted to the ground floor.

This is quoted verbatim from Appendix 2: Community Services Proformas Cuts Proposals:

<http://councilmeetings.lewisham.gov.uk/documents/s60231/04Appendix2CommunityServicesProfomasCutsproposals.pdf>

Following the SSC Select Committee members' discussion of a challenge we posed to them potential illegality and failures of public duty in implementing these proposals, it was decided to refer this matter onto PAC on the grounds that:

The Committee felt the proposals in their current form were unacceptable and further consultation was necessary before a decision could be made. A full Equalities Impact Assessment should also be undertaken. The Committee highlighted that section 9 of the budget pro-forma stated that those affected included 'some of the most vulnerable in our society (who) will have been signposted to the library service by other public sector bodies such as Job Centre Plus, Central Government Departments, council services, GP etc.'

We request that urgent Equality Impact Assessments are made, that are full, transparent, rigorous, detailing any and all mitigating actions with regards to people with disabilities, adults with learning difficulties, homeless people, EAL residents, children and young people, the digitally excluded - who will all have difficulty accessing library services without staff - this particularly applies to Deptford and Downham - areas highly populated with residents with 'protected characteristics' as defined under the Equalities Act 2010.

The initial index impact report for the COM 11 Hub Libraries Cuts Proposals has already identified a high risk of further antisocial behaviour within the named libraries, which are likely to make these libraries unsafe no-go areas for children, vulnerable adults and older people. What will be done to mitigate this?

We request that the Equality Impact Assessments and Health & Safety Assessments are made public *before* the consultation on the cuts and argue for more time for these to be carried out by officers.

Along with the predicted impact on communities, we believe these cuts will lead to the rational probability of Lewisham Council failing to exercise its statutory duty to "provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof" under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. It is with regard "all desiring persons" that Lewisham may fail its statutory duty if these cuts go ahead.

Can the Public Accounts Select Committee justify continuing with these proposed hub library cuts, when unstaffed/reduced-staffed libraries are likely to Lewisham to a failure of meet its public sector statutory duties on several fronts and leave vulnerable service users with with nowhere to go at times when they need them most?

The three 'hub' libraries are the only libraries in the borough that remain fully operational with paid professional staff following the successive rounds of cuts in 2010 and 2015. Removing staff and/or reducing staff hours from these critical sites in 2019 means that they would become hubs without spokes, unable to move forward in meeting the needs of Lewisham's population, and thereby precipitating an irreversible decline in both quality of service and quality of life.

Children and young people are the most likely demographic group to use a library and are the most frequent users of library services across the country ([DCMS Taking Part 2016 diversity statistics](#)). Children under the age of 16 can only enter during

“staffless” times if accompanied by an adult. With many families in Lewisham struggling to make ends meet and work multiple jobs to survive, and one in four of Lewisham residents being under the age of 19, the professionally-staffed public library is one of the only places children and young people can go safely to meet their needs after school.

Women, BAME people, disabled people and people with limited English language and digital literacy skills are much more likely to use their local library, so they will be disproportionately affected by library cuts [DCMS Taking Part 2016 diversity statistics](#).

The contribution that professionally-staffed public libraries make to safeguarding the literacy and development of current and future generations is not worth sacrificing to these cuts. Indeed, cutting from public libraries at this critical time will only increase demand on other essential services:

“Being a regular library user is associated with a 1.4 percent increase in the likelihood of reporting good general health. We valued this improvement in health in terms of cost savings to the NHS. Based on reductions in GP visits caused by this improvement in health, we predict the medical cost savings associated with library engagement at £1.32 per person per year. It is possible to aggregate NHS cost savings across the library-using English population to estimate an average cost saving of £27.5 million per year.” (Arts Council England, 2015)

“Digital inclusion delivery models and pilots carried out by 16 library services across England, funded by Tinder Foundation [now Good Things Foundation], allowed library services to support 1,600 people. Potential channel shift cost savings for government services of £800k per annum across the 16 library service areas was identified - [£7.5m per year if rolled out nationally across all 151 authorities](#)” (CILIP, 2018).

We urge the Public Accounts Select Committee to recommend to Mayor and Cabinet that these proposed cuts be reconsidered as they are based on a false economy, put large sections of the Lewisham public at risk, and are likely to place the council in breach of its public sector statutory duties.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Alice Corble
(on behalf of Save Lewisham Libraries Campaign Group)

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