



Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee

Report title: The Lewisham Library and Information Service update

Date:	3 November 2022
Key decision:	No
Class:	Part 1
Ward(s) affected:	All Wards
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Outline and recommendations

The purpose of the report is to update Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee on the strategic positioning of the Library and Information Service as a core enabler of community resilience and delivery agent for corporate priorities set out in March 2022.

Comments and suggestions from the Committee are sought and welcomed on:

- How to engage on optimising opening hours
- Opportunities for further partnership working to optimise the use of library buildings

Timeline of engagement and decision-making

Last reports to Safer Stronger Select Committee dated 3 March 2022, 21 September 2021, and 9 October 2019.

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1. Summary

- 1.1. Following the report of 21 September 2021, the Committee requested a paper on the strategic positioning of the Library and Information Service. A paper was presented and welcomed by SSCSC in March 2022 and this latest paper sets out progress against the issues raised.

2. Policy context

- 2.1. Libraries are free at the point of access, open to all, and form a network of provision that covers all of Lewisham. And because library services across London and nationally have fostered collaborative working over many years, accessing Lewisham libraries also enables access to a richness of resource that spreads far beyond the borough boundaries.
- 2.2. Libraries have also pioneered partnership working and taking services out of the buildings into communities. Visits to schools, home library services and outreach services into many communities have all long been explored in libraries. In a recent poll, librarians were the second most trusted professionals after nurses. Lewisham's service in particular has a long and proud history of change and transformation, and can keep doing so to impact positively on the way the Council supports and enables communities throughout Lewisham. For all of these reasons, the Library and Information Service continues to support all of Lewisham's four strategic themes:
- 2.3. An economically sound future – The Service supports residents and businesses through free public access to WIFI, computers, reference resources and partnerships such as Start-up in London Libraries delivered with the British Library, and much more. And beyond these services, the core offer of reading and literacy underpins children's learning, self-help and skills development for adults and the opportunities around libraries as part of a customer access programme offer efficiency and cost-effectiveness so the Council can optimise scarce resources.
- 2.4. A healthy and well future – The Service actively supports social prescribing, hosts health lectures, promotes national programmes such as Reading Well and unique initiatives such as the Reading Friends aimed at combating social isolation. The service further encourages people to be actively involved, supporting their physical and mental well-being, including opportunities to access free sessions in the libraries, such as Tai Chi, sitting down exercise, yoga and more. For many, the very act of visiting the library, seeing other people and talking to staff and other customers is an enormous benefit. Free to enter, no questions asked about purpose, libraries are one of the few remaining civic spaces that enable an individual to participate in wider society in ways that make them feel safe, secure and part of something bigger.
- 2.5. A greener future – The Service hosts regular events by external agencies that support residents on identifying greener utilities providers, insulation solutions, etc. The Service consistently encourages people to take personal action to reduce carbon emissions and improve air quality and builds in green policies into things like procurement of the courier service used by libraries. With a very established role in information provision, both online and face to face, libraries can play a very dynamic role in reaching all sections of the community to

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promote awareness and action.

- 2.6. A future we all have a part in – Libraries are a free, statutory, universal service and provide access to information and support for residents to read for pleasure or for learning, find information to enable them to make informed decisions or learn about the world and act as either a self or mediated access point to a host of data, entertainment and sources to become digitally engaged. The service has the power to enable others to think and act to realise the aspirations people have for themselves, their families and their communities. Libraries have a long history of acting as agents of social change, either directly or through supporting others. This radical history, borne of books, continues as libraries still act for many as windows onto a world that would otherwise be impossible to see.
- 2.7. Libraries' physical presence in communities is also a powerful symbol – a symbol of a Council that recognises and invests in communities and all they stand for. The library network covers the borough geographically, enabling access for all within a few minutes' walk of either a council or community run library. Working in partnership with other Council services and other organisations, the network of council and community run libraries offer enormous opportunities to build social capital at a community level, and help realise initiatives like 15 minute neighbourhoods and resilient communities in which everyone can be supported to live their best lives.

3. Background

- 3.1. The report to Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee of 9 October 2019 started a conversation on the future of the Lewisham Library and Information Service.
- 3.2. The report to the Committee of 21 September 2021 – as well as providing an update on the achievements of the Service in the years 2019-2021 – looked at the results of the public engagement on the elements that would be of major importance to residents that the Service could positively contribute to.
- 3.3. The report in March 2022 set out the approach the library service would seek to deliver as it sought to cement a post Covid role as a key delivery agent for body corporate and community roles.
- 3.4. This report builds on previous work to update on progress made and outstanding issues.

4. Context

- 4.1. The Library and Information Service operates through a network of four hub libraries (in buildings owned and staffed by the council) and eight community libraries (in buildings managed and staffed by partner organisations). And it offers Archive and Local History as well as Home Library services. The libraries cover the whole of the borough with hubs in Catford, Deptford, Downham, and Lewisham, and community libraries in Blackheath, Crofton Park, Grove Park, Forest Hill, Manor House, New Cross, Torrington, and

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Sydenham.

- 4.2. The Lewisham Model – the collaboration between the council and partner organisations in offering access to library services – is based on the fact that the council is still responsible for the library provision wherever it is accessed from. The council owns the books, shelving, and IT infrastructure that allows the books to be borrowed. The partner organisations support this in exchange for free rent on the premises they occupy to support their own charitable objectives.
- 4.3. Our libraries offer Value:
They are free, offer access to books, technology, information, and services provided by skilled friendly staff
Our libraries are Impactful:
They stimulate aspiration, build understanding of the world and grow strong communities.
Our libraries are Supportive:
They help people and communities progress through vital stages of their development.
- 4.4. Lewisham Libraries offer opportunities to access culture and express creativity (with exhibitions, poetry reading, reading groups), support reading and literacy (from Bookstart programmes for the under 5s to the Reading Ahead scheme for emerging adult readers), foster digital literacy (supporting access to the internet and digital services in libraries and in the home through loanable web enabled tablets), support economic growth (through projects like Start-up in London Libraries and a wealth of free resources for businesses), are embedded in their communities (through community libraries, visits to doctor surgeries, early years settings, older residents' homes), support independent and supported learning (through hosting courses and giving access to online learning), and support health & wellbeing (through links to Macmillan, the Reading Well scheme, health lectures in libraries). Initiatives like City of Stories – with Spread the Word – are a direct way of helping communities work with authors to explore the written word.

5. A strategic vision for the Library and Information Service

- 5.1. At the last SSCSC, officers committed to explore with colleagues, partners and Members a number of key actions - these are set out in Appendix A.
- 5.2. A set of guiding principles were set out in that paper, and using those, the service has delivered some excellent outcomes.
- 5.3. The five key guiding principles were set out as :
- **Make a difference to people's lives** – how the service supports people to meet the aspirations they hold for themselves, their families, friends and communities must always underpin thinking and delivery;
 - **Look out as well as in** – working with partners inside and out of the Council ensures libraries capitalise on the skills of others whilst also adding value;
 - **Recognise the world around** – public services are under extraordinary pressure. Libraries need to earn their right to support and funding by

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delivering on community and borough wide priorities. And flex to do this within a clear vision, set of values and priorities;

- **Make positive choices** – the library service can deliver a lot. But it cannot do everything. It must be brave in offering options for scrutiny and recognising where others can do better, and then focus on where it truly adds value;
- **Be brave, be bold, be open** – public libraries have been around for 150 years and prospered because they have sought and found new roles that deliver recognisable difference. That need is greater than ever.

- 5.4. The service has gradually re-opened post Covid. Whilst still not delivering the opening hours pre-Covid – over 80 hours a week – the service is now open six days a week in Lewisham, Deptford and Downham from 9am – 7pm week days and 9am – 5pm on Saturdays, with the same pattern in Catford Library with the addition of Sundays from 10am – 5pm to give a seven day service. With additional staff recruitment underway, it is hoped all libraries will open seven days a week from January onwards
- 5.5. This matters because libraries remain one of the very few free to enter, universally accessible services. And whilst online and digital services are hugely important, the face to face element of libraries delivers a host of outcomes for many individuals within communities. That social and community role continues to make libraries a beacon community service – rooted in and for local communities.
- 5.6. A clear sign of the value of libraries for people is the success of Catford Library. Opened in July 2022, the service is a resounding success, recording 14,000 visits every month since opening with very little sign that usage is decreasing. 1080 members have joined the library and all aspects of the service are flourishing, from use of the computers to visits made to the children’s library through to people asking about use of the spaces for hire. It is a high quality very popular service offer that is resonating with the local community.
- 5.7. The service continues to deliver corporate agendas. For example, as part of the London Borough of Culture, libraries were pivotal in refocussing the programming of the event to ensure that all communities were able to access events and activities. Part of the very successful Discover Lewisham programme, libraries once again used their anchor status in communities to bring what had been previously seen as perhaps too distant a year of culture to people across the Borough. This was followed up by Storytrails, International Literacy Day, Roald Dahl Day, and National Poetry Day events, and more recently, as every year, a programme in libraries to celebrate Black History Month. This clear role in stepping into communities to translate what can sometimes seem remote agendas as a key aspect of the service, and despite many pressures, libraries have not wavered in the commitment since the last Committee meeting.
- 5.8. Similarly, a new programme with the British Library has seen the launch of the Business and Intellectual Property Centre (BIPC Local) in the borough, a great initiative to support new and established entrepreneurs, offering access to high quality business information resources, briefing sessions, networking and partnering opportunities, and more.

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6. Potential ideas

- 6.1. At the last SSCSC a range of roles for the service was set out an options to explore. The service has continued to do that.

For example, libraries will play a pivotal role in the Warm Welcomes programme. The Warm Welcome campaign is a pan-Lewisham programme to open up warm, local spaces to residents to support our communities through the Cost of Living Crisis.

The Council is developing the campaign in conjunction with the Local Strategic Partnership, which is identifying local spaces that can provide warm spaces free of charge for residents.

The campaign seeks to improve residents' awareness of community spaces and events they can access that can provide comfortable and social experiences without an expectation to spend money. Further, to use such spaces to signpost support available to residents.

We want to make sure these spaces feel inviting and friendly, and that those accessing them do not feel stigmatised, or even that they are 'not for them' – so they'll have a different secondary function – eg 'family homework clubs' or 'cinema nights'.

- 6.2. This builds on work underway to look at digital inclusion – how libraries can help bridge the divide between those with access to digital and online resources and those without. Libraries have always held that role, but now, as part of a corporate programme, that work will draw libraries into a wider web of council services so that referrals, help and support will be broader and deeper.
- 6.3. This mirrors work underway for libraries to play an active role in health agendas – social prescribing, or trying to keep people well for longer and out of the social care world. It is a hugely powerful agenda and libraries have the potential for community and individual mental wellbeing that leisure services have for physical health.
- 6.4. However, there remain real challenges.
- 6.5. At the last SSCSC, it was noted that library buildings exist in a world where many people, rightly, have high expectations of the social, educational and functional spaces they use. People expect the basics to be in place – hygiene, cleanliness, safety, a degree of comfort. It is not acceptable to offer services to communities in spaces that are dirty, unpleasant and uncomfortable. It is profoundly disrespectful. The point was made that how library buildings are maintained is a key question for the Council. Deptford, Catford and Downham are very good spaces that meet the criteria of safe, comfortable spaces. Lewisham Library does not.
- 6.6. There are specific issues around Lewisham Library. The Council awaits the decision from central Government on the Levelling Up Fund submitted for Lewisham that includes a major revamp for Lewisham Library. The decision is due imminently, but issues in central Government mean there is no definite timeline. Meanwhile, Lewisham Library remains a very significant challenge to operate. Plans are now advanced to assess a way forward should the LUF bid

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fail, because there is significant agreement that the state of the library is a matter of concern. This could involve repairing the building or a much bigger programme of work, within the context of extreme pressure on the Council's capital spend.

- 6.7. Budgets available to the service are also under pressure, as they are across the entire Council. With long opening hours and already tight staffing levels, pressure on the service is high. And whilst there is a clear desire to do more, realism is needed about capacity within a service that has seen budgets fall markedly over the last decade. The service is of course not unique in this regard. Current pressures mean looking at opening hours and trying to arrive at an opening pattern that safeguards access whilst ensuring the service operates within the means available to it at a time of extraordinary pressure.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1. The above strategic approach and action plan impact both the revenue and capital funding over the next few years.
- 7.2. The community libraries use the book stock purchased by the Council and occupy their premises rent-free but otherwise receive no financial support.
- 7.3. The Library Services has had to deliver savings of £369k for the 21-22 financial year and a further £72k for the 22-23 financial year giving a total budget reduction of £441k across the last two financial years. These savings were made up of £300,000 delivered through a staff reorganisation and a further £141,000 which was the Library Service share of the additional Corporate Saving top sliced from all staffing budgets. The service net budget in 2021-2022 is £2.6m of which £2.1m is staffing.

8. Legal implications

- 8.1. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

9. Equalities implications

- 9.1. Having equitable access to library services across Lewisham is of significant importance. Ensuring the quality of service, stock, resources and support enables greater efforts of library staff to reach all communities and address some of the under-utilisation of various services that recent research has highlighted. Any changes will need an EQIA in line with corporate requirements.

10. Climate change and environmental implications

- 10.1. Libraries have a role to play in supporting climate action.

11. Crime and disorder implications

- 11.1. There are no direct crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

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12. Health and wellbeing implications

12.1. Libraries have a role to play in supporting the health and wellbeing of residents.

13. Background papers

13.1. Reports to Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee of:
[3 March 2022](#)
[21 September 2021](#)
[9 October 2019](#)

14. Glossary

Term	Definition
BIPC Local	A local centre delivering access to the British Library's Business and Intellectual Property Centre services and hosting access to other digital and physical business support resources.

15. Report author and contacts

15.1. David Murray, Interim Director of Culture, Libraries and Learning
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Appendix A

Action lines from SSSC in March 2022 on libraries.

What	What we need to know
Digital inclusion	How to use library IT and staff skills to close the digital exclusion gap?
Skills and work agenda	How do libraries work within a wider network to help build their skills profiles, deliver job readiness or support small businesses?
Resident experience	What role do libraries take to support the new strategy, be part of the service web available and offer spaces where people can feel part of their wider community?
Customer access	How do libraries mediate access to other services and into digital?
Educational attainment for children	How do libraries formalise activities that maintain literacy and learning levels through additional services?
Independent living	Do libraries have a formal role in keeping people out of expensive adult social care by supporting independent living, physical and mental well-being?
Community resilience	What is the role of libraries in building safer, stronger communities where people can feel part of something 'better'?
Culture	What do libraries contribute to a rich cultural life across the borough? How do they collaborate with partners as diverse as the Hornimans and Goldsmiths?
15 minute neighbourhoods and assets	What is the potential around libraries as community anchors?
Community libraries	After a decade of operating, what is working and what could we learn from to improve?
IT	How do we deliver a resilient IT service for all the libraries?
Capital	What are the resources available or options for growing funding to deliver appropriate buildings?
Digital services	What is the role of libraries in Lewisham - as conduits, creators, gateways?
Young people	How do libraries offer safe, welcoming spaces to young people as part of a wider menu of support?
Seldom heard voices	How do libraries reach those who need the service but are not currently using what is available?

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