



Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee

Report title: The Lewisham Library and Information Service 2019 – 2021 update

Date:	21 September 2021
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 Select Committee on the activities of the Service in the last two financial years.

Timeline of engagement and decision-making

Last report to Safer Stronger Select Committee dated 9 October 2019
Public consultation carried out in June – September 2021

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1. Summary

- 1.1. Given the absence of a report to this Committee last year, this paper offers a view of the Service over the financial years 2019 – 2021 (See appendices for details).
- 1.2. The analysis of performance is based on information recorded between April 2019 and March 2021.

2. Policy context

- 2.1. The Library and Information Service supports all of Lewisham's four strategic themes:
- 2.2. 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.
- 2.3. A healthy and well future – The Service actively support 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.
- 2.4. 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.
- 2.5. A future we all have a part in – The Service played an active part in engaging residents during the pandemic through supporting the Test & Trace provision, maintaining the Home Library Service, and developing a survey – presented as part of this report – to re-engage audiences as services resume following the lockdown. Libraries are a free, statutory, universal service and provide access to information and support for residents to become digitally engaged.

3. Background

- 3.1. Public libraries have changed substantially and Lewisham Libraries are no exception. What is exceptional, however, becomes apparent when looking back. Since the year 1999-2000, our libraries have been on a substantial transformation journey.
A major shift happened after 2010 with the introduction of the Community Libraries model (see para 7.1).
In 2016-2017, the Service went through the most profound change process in its history, which produced a lean and responsive service that can proactively respond to the challenges ahead.
In 2017-2018, the Service embedded the changes and completed the work on the savings targets.

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The pandemic has had an impact on the Service both profoundly impairing operations and forcing a transformation that has been embedded into a full reorganisation that will be implemented in the year 2021-2022.

4. Key elements of the last two years' work Main service provision and performance

- 4.1. With one of the highest levels of footfall in the country prior to Covid-19, the Service reaches all socioeconomic groups. It supports children's literacy with physical books, and for adults of all ages it also provides access to information and much-needed space for study and work. The library buildings with their deep reach among the most disadvantaged residents and rich community-focused programmes, stand out as a model from which to build across the Service.
- 4.2. Compared to previous years, the main indicators of performance, visits to our buildings and issues of books (particularly physical books) suffered, as Appendix 1 shows.
Compared to the previous year, in 2019-2020 Issues grew by 20.5% from 593,899 to 715,778, but dropped back to 377,704 in 2020-2021. The closures impacted the number of visits more severely. Compared to the previous year, in 2019-2020 visits dropped only 6.6% from 2,012,709 to 1,880,321. But in 2020-2021, they plummeted to 58,680.
- 4.3. In spite of the closures, over the past 18 months, library staff have re-created much of their activities and events programme using online platforms. Many staff have been re-deployed to support Lewisham's shielding services, providing advice and support to the most vulnerable. Over the autumn staff were also assigned to deliver local Test & Trace, contributing to Lewisham achieving some of the highest reach-rates in London. For the library service, the Covid-19 response has revealed untapped potential: to reach new audiences and increase impact, to use digital platforms more effectively, and to benefit from staff skills not previously utilised.

5. Key elements of the last two years' work New ways of working (digital), ICT, infrastructure and service reorganisation

- 5.1. New approaches to digital inclusion, business support, and self-checkout, some pre-dating the pandemic, provided exciting potential for the service to increase reach, impact, and efficiency.
- 5.2. Library staff developed their skills to engage new and existing audiences online through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube. Staff demonstrated the ability to develop creative engagement skills and work remotely, in ways that have been embraced by the upcoming reorganisation, reflecting the work that the Service is doing to embrace modern technologies.
- 5.3. The Service has been working with the ICT Shared Service to plan and deliver a complete overhaul of its ICT infrastructure including new computers, better internet connectivity, better Wi Fi, new print and payment solutions across the

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Hub Libraries. This project is likely to be delivered before the summer of 2022.

- 5.4. The Service is delivering a full staff reorganisation – to be completed by December 2021 – which will
- deliver the savings agreed for the financial year 2021-22 (£300,000) and
 - contribute to the share of additional corporate savings (£68,000) resulting from new ways of working.
- 5.5. It is hoped that the combination of the three factors, the new digital skills of staff, an improved ICT infrastructure, and the new staffing structure will support the council's efforts to develop its Customer Experience and Digital Inclusion objectives.

6. Key elements of the last two years' work Catford and Lewisham

- 6.1. The Service has developed an approach that will deliver the refurbishment of the Lewisham Library building and the move of the Catford Library. The council has confirmed an investment of £960,000 into libraries in Catford and Lewisham town centres, as Lewisham looks ahead to its year as the Mayor of London's Borough of Culture.
- 6.2. Catford
The investment will include a new seven-day a week library in Catford Shopping Centre, with services moving over from Laurence House – it is hoped that the new library will be more accessible, with shoppers encouraged to pop in for a browse, to access services or take part in activities.
- 6.3. The space will be similar in size to the existing Catford Library and will offer improved services for residents, including more study space, new computers, improved Wi-Fi and flexible space for events and activities. Opening hours will increase to include Sundays, which was not possible at Laurence House.
- 6.4. While the rest of the borough's libraries have reopened following the lifting of COVID-related restrictions, Catford Library has remained closed as Laurence House, which accommodates most of the Council's desk-based staff, has not fully reopened yet. The building is set to be remodelled, including space for residents to meet with staff on the ground floor, when the library moves.
- 6.5. Work on the new library will begin in the coming weeks, and is expected to complete in the New Year.
- 6.6. Lewisham
The Council has also confirmed investment in Lewisham Central Library, with essential maintenance and refurbishment works set to take place early next year. The works will require the library to temporarily close for up to six months, so work will not begin until the new Catford Library has opened.
- 6.7. The Service will be seeking opportunities to support the council's investment in Lewisham through a bid to the Arts Council England – Library Improvement Fund. The outcome of an application will be confirmed by March 2022.

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7. Key elements of the last two years' work Community Libraries

- 7.1. Since 2010, Lewisham has established eight community libraries with community groups, namely Blackheath with Age Exchange, Crofton Park and Grove Park with Eco Communities, Forest Hill, Manor House, and Sydenham with V22, New Cross with New Cross Learning and Bold Vision, and Torridon Road with the Archibald Corbett Community Library, Arts and Heritage Centre.
- 7.2. The council leased the assets (the library buildings) at no cost to the partner organisation, in exchange for the continued support for the provision of library services in the building.
- 7.3. In practice, the management of the council building is transferred to a community group that uses it to achieve their objectives. The council does not charge rent and does not contribute funding in relation to the provision of library services, but it will continue to buy books, train the community library staff, and maintain responsibility for the self-service infrastructure that allows the issuing of books.
- 7.4. All the partner organisations – as the voluntary sector at large – experienced severe difficulties linked to the scarcity of volunteers during the pandemic. Many, who used to dedicate their time to supporting their local community, were forced to stay at home. As each individual volunteer and community library assessed their risks it has stretched their resources and impaired the service delivery at the community library.
- 7.5. However, despite these limitations, the role of the community libraries has remained integral to the service provision and to the support of local communities with relevant services during the most challenging times of the lockdowns. Many introduced supporting services for those most at risk during the pandemic. Adapted to the government recommendations to sustain essential service delivery. And took the opportunity during the forced closure to improve their buildings, too.
- 7.6. The details of the community libraries' achievements during the last two years is available as Appendix 3.

8. Key elements of the last two years' work Public consultation

- 8.1. Lewisham's libraries have been substantially closed for over a year, with efforts to provide some level of service through Click & Collect, which have been interrupted repeatedly due to COVID restrictions.
- 8.2. As most of our lives gradually returned to normal, we were keen to re-engage with our audiences to hear if their priorities have changed. We wanted to know – through a survey and a series of focus groups – what it is that is most important to them, to make sure our libraries remain as relevant as possible going forward.
- 8.3. The library service resident survey was conducted over June-July, generating 1,113 responses most of which came from library users; a full analysis of the

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survey is included as Appendix 5 to this report. The survey asked whether respondents used the library service, when they last used it and what they used it for. The survey also captured demographic details including age, gender, ethnicity, postcode, and respondents' housing tenure type. In terms of how survey respondents say they use libraries the most common uses stated by respondents in descending order are:

- a. borrowing or browsing books or other materials
- b. accessing online resources
- c. using free Wi Fi
- d. using computers and printing facilities
- e. using the space to study
- f. visiting the library to meet someone
- g. taking a child to an event
- h. taking part in an event
- i. using the archive and local history

- 8.4. The most common reason given by respondents for using a library, by some margin, is to borrow or browse books and other materials. Beyond this there are important differences in the ways respondents with different demographic characteristics use library services. These differences are important to maximise benefit and focusing the service on strategic local needs.
- 8.5. Age
those aged 34 or under are more likely, proportionately, to visit to use Wi-Fi, or to find study space, while those aged 35 and over are more likely to take a child to an event. Those 34 and under are also more likely to use the library service to get help with applying for a job, or improving their digital skills (although these are less common types of use overall).
- 8.6. Housing tenure type
those who do not own their own homes are more likely than owner-occupiers to use libraries to access computers and printing facilities, for space to study, and for free Wi-Fi. Children's events on the other hand are more likely to be used by owner occupiers than those in other forms of housing.
- 8.7. Ethnicity
White respondents are proportionately more likely than other ethnicities to say they used libraries for borrowing or browsing books, accessing online resources, free Wi-Fi, visiting the library to meet someone, children's events, adult events, and using archives and local history. Conversely, non-White respondents are much more likely than White respondents to say they had used libraries to get help to apply for a job, improve their digital skills, or get help to apply for a government or council service online (although these are less common types of use overall). Using libraries to access computers and printing and space to study, is equally common among all respondents regardless of ethnicity.
- 8.8. Gender and socio-economic status of respondent postcode seem to have little influence overall on how respondents say they use libraries.
- 8.9. Taken together this suggests that while book browsing and borrowing is used by all respondents to an equal extent, younger respondents and those who do not own their own homes, are more likely to use libraries to access computers

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and printing, for space to study, and for free Wi-Fi.

In a way, these appear to be 'life essentials'. There is a similar pattern with ethnicity in that non-White respondents are proportionately more likely to use the library service to get help to apply for a job, improve their digital skills, or get help to apply for a government or council service online.

- 8.10. In addition to the survey we convened two focus groups, one with BAME community networks and services, and one with networks and services focused on young people. These were held after the survey closed, to account for the under-representation of young people and BAME residents among survey respondents.

The focus groups provided additional insight and detail to the survey results, and there were striking similarities in the messages from both groups.

8.11. BAME focus group

People facing severe disadvantage often use libraries for things 'which support survival rather than for leisure or pleasure' for example free Wi-Fi, safe comfortable environments, and privacy. Access to printing is also vital for individuals needing to access services but with limited personal documentation, or for immigration applications. Printing and computer access is available elsewhere but often at limited times, or with limited capacity, whereas the library service has hours of operation and professional infrastructure which make it reliable and trustworthy.

Many BAME residents however, are unaware of what the library service offers because information does not reach them, especially non-English speakers, refugees and migrants. It was also suggested that the library service's group activities (for adults, families, or children) could potentially be of help to many BAME residents, but those residents might be discouraged to join because of language barriers or because they take place during working hours.

Some refugees, asylum seekers and migrants may have concerns (albeit misplaced) about having to register or give details in order to access library services, and more could be done to reinforce the fact that the service can be used without having to provide any information. It was suggested that some people may be happy to sit near a library entrance to use Wi-Fi but feel wary of venturing in further. There was optimism that making libraries part of the Borough of Sanctuary programme and introducing the ground breaking link to ProxyAddress could enable the library service to increase its impact on those in the greatest need especially if information could be spread by word of mouth.

8.12. Young people focus group

Young people in the group had been unable to, or had chosen not to attend libraries during the pandemic and responses were based on perceptions, or memory. In terms of young people's needs, 'safe space' was mentioned often; places to meet friends without being judged. Mental health and poverty were also major concerns. 'Hub spaces' for group study without being told off were prized, although it was unclear whether this is what they saw libraries as providing, or whether this is a need that is not fully met.

Experiences of the library service sometimes feel clunky and bureaucratic.

While young people saw libraries as important and saw opportunities to work with officers to improve the service, they also described frustrations about the quality of the service and there not being enough staff to help.

They were also frustrated by apparent restrictions on use of computers by under 18s in terms of timings, and permissible websites. They found the

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process of obtaining a library card difficult: having to provide proof of address was hard for some teenagers who do not have good relationships with their parents. This was at odds with the approach of other services to under 18s. Hence some might rather go to a friend's house to study or use Wi-Fi. Having to pay for printing was also seen as a disincentive.

It seemed that information about provision does not always get through to young people, as often the perceived difficulties do not actually exist, as in the case of printing, which is free for study and research, or limitations on computer booking that – unless demand is substantial – can easily be extended.

There was strong recognition of the books and reading offer but confusion about what was available around digital access, Wi-Fi, skills and study space.

- 8.13. A senior commissioner for young people's services echoed the views of young people, but additionally saw youth digital access as a major area of need that had become more apparent over the past year. She saw libraries as an 'an amazing resource' and believed the safe space, and Wi-Fi and computer access offered by libraries had untapped potential to enable service access, e.g. for Lewisham's new online counselling service which was text based and requires safe spaces with internet-access and privacy. The senior commissioner also suggested that the move of the Baseline service out of libraries was a missed opportunity, and that libraries could play a greater role as youth hubs. She urged the library service to consider ways to help children and families services reach more of their target audience, one example was ESOL families, but there were many more.

9. Priorities for the next 12 months

9.1. The Service's priorities in 2021 – 2022 include:

- Increasing the residents' awareness of its digital collections (books, audio, newspapers, and magazines) and improving both physical and digital collections.
- Reopening a hub library in Catford.
- Completing the Lewisham Library refurbishment.
- Delivering ICT upgrades in Hub Libraries through a programme of replacement for all the libraries PCs and iMacs, improvement of broadband connectivity to the buildings, improvement of Wi-Fi distribution, introduction of new technologies including a new computer booking system, a remote printing solution, electronic payment.
- Supporting Community Libraries to bid to NCIL and other funding as these become available.
- Supporting Community Libraries with volunteer recruitment.
- Contributing to the Borough of Culture programme using libraries both as cultural venues and as content creators.
- Continuing to ensure that the service reaches all residents and in particular the most vulnerable as suggested by the analysis of the survey

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responses.

- Complete the procurement of the Library Consortium Transport Contract. This will renew Lewisham as the lead authority on the Framework Contract that serves 18 library authorities in the provision of transport services, including the movement of books with the borough and across the Consortium.

10. Financial implications

- 10.1. There are no specific financial implications to this report. The community libraries use the book stock purchased by the Council and occupy their premises rent-free but otherwise receive no financial support.
- 10.2. In the year 2021-2022, the Service will be delivering savings of £368,000, £300,000 through a staff reorganisation and £68,000 as the Service's share of additional Corporate Saving (a council wide staff saving resulting from new ways of working). The service net budget in 2021/2022 is £2.6m of which £2m is staffing.

11. Legal implications

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

12. Equalities implications

- 12.1. As paragraph 8 exemplifies, the survey revealed areas that the Service will need to develop, especially in relation to the engagement of BAME communities and young people.
- 12.2. It is also essential that staff review the way that services are presented to new arrivals to the borough, as cultural barriers may impede them from taking full advantage of the wealth of resources available to every resident in the borough.

13. Climate change and environmental implications

- 13.1. As described in 2.4, libraries have a role to play in supporting climate action.

14. Crime and disorder implications

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

15. Health and wellbeing implications

- 15.1. As described in 2.3, libraries have a role to play in supporting the health and wellbeing of residents.

16. Background papers

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- 16.1. Budget Cuts report 3 Feb 2021
<https://councilmeetings.lewisham.gov.uk/documents/s77135/Budget%20Cuts.pdf>

17. Glossary

Term	Definition

18. Report author and contacts

- 18.1. Liz Dart, Director of Culture, Libraries and Learning liz.dart@lewisham.gov.uk
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19. Appendices

- 19.1. Appendix 1 – a general update on the performance of the Service
19.2. Appendix 2 – an overview of activities in the Hub Libraries
19.3. Appendix 3 – an overview of activities in the Community Libraries
19.4. Appendix 4 – a summary of Issues and Visits statistics
19.5. Appendix 5 – an analysis of the public consultation carried out in the summer of 2021.

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