CROYDON

Library Service Review Phases 1-2 report

Croydon Council

Activist Group

16 November 2023

This report was produced by Croydon Council and Activist Group.

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Executive summary

Introduction

1. **Croydon Council is facing significant financial challenges and must continue to drive improvements in the long-term sustainability of its library services and other assets.**

2. **The Council has launched a Library Service Review, building on the extensive feedback from previous consultations. The Council wants to understand the impact of the changes made to the service in 2022 following previous consultations and to better understand what residents truly need in the future.**

3. The review is based on a needs analysis and evaluation framework for assessing the impact of the current library service model and opportunities and options for improvement. **The Council wants to work closely with Croydon residents and partners to identify a set of future options for the services that can be positive and helpful**.

4. **The review started in July 2023 and it is planned to begin consultation in January 24 with a view to decisions being made on changes which would be implemented from May 2024 onwards.**

The library service

5. **Croydon's library service is currently delivered over 13 buildings grouped into three areas: North, Central and South**. The service also delivers a home library service and supports delivery of library services at Upper Norwood Library Hub, situated in Lambeth but jointly owned by Croydon and Lambeth and operated by Lambeth Council and the Upper Norwood Library Trust.

6. **Croydon Council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museum Act (PLMA, 1964) to "provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof".** The Council also has a duty to develop its library services in consultation with local residents and undertake statutory consultation on any significant service changes.

7. **In 2021, the Council consulted the public on ways of saving £500k from the library service budget to help address the Council's financial position.** Feedback from two rounds of consultation rejected options such as closures, outsourcing, community management and favoured the option of reducing opening hours by 21%. **The Council decided to progress the reduction in staffed opening hours which were to be mitigated by introducing self-service opening ('Open+') with no library staff present and by other measures such as recruiting more volunteers.**

8. **These changes began to be implemented in 2022. The reduction in opening hours was much greater and Open+ and volunteering proved more difficult and slower to implement. Public feedback about the changes has been negative.**

The role of the library service

9.   **While books and other reading materials remain central to Croydon's statutory library service, the service plays a much wider part in the life of the people who live, work and study in the borough**. To reflect this, it uses the Libraries Connected 'Universal Offers' as a framework for developing and delivering a comprehensive public library service:

- Reading.

- Information and Digital.

- Culture and creativity.

- Health and wellbeing.

10.   These are supplemented by three other offers:

- Employment and learning.

- Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise.

- Children's Promise.

11.   **The performance of the library service in delivering these universal offers has been reviewed, taking into account the changes in the ethnically diverse borough and the severe deprivation facing parts of the population**. These challenges include:

- **Income deprivation affecting children** leading to poorer levels of literacy and educational attainment.

- **Health inequalities and mental health challenges** associated with isolation.

- **Digital exclusion**, particularly affecting the most deprived for whom many public services now operate as 'digital by default'.

- **Exclusion from arts and culture** among many children and young people who first encounter culture and creativity in a library setting.

- Lower incomes in the borough compared with other London boroughs, particularly in the north of the borough leading to **a need for help with job search and study**.

- **Additional language needs** in some communities.

Engagement findings so far

12.   Engagement in the first two phases of this project have been limited to briefings with a number of interested groups and with Council officers and library staff.

13.   **At the external briefings, people expressed unhappiness and frustration at the impact of moving to part-time opening, seen by some as 'disastrous'**. It was reported that it had particularly affected parents, children and people with traditional working hours and was impacting on people who need help and are struggling. Poor communication was cited and a lack of clarity on the offer and opening times.

14. **Library staff reported challenges faced with the new opening hours and the pressure it placed on them which was affecting their ability to provide the quality of service they wanted for their users.** They also reported the problems with technology and the physical fabric of some buildings. They came up with a range of ideas for change to help make the service a good one.

15. **Across the discussions so far, there is a strong consensus that the changes made in 2022 are not working.**

The impact of the changes made in 2022

16. **On one measure, the issue of all books and other materials, the service has increased slightly since before the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours, albeit against a low base of usage pre pandemic and when benchmarked against neighbours.** That increase has been driven by a greater take-up of digital books and materials to the point where they represent nearly a third of all issues. Digital issues do not depend on the opening hours of libraries.

17. **For all the library service's other functions which do rely on library opening hours, the combined effect of the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours has been devastating**. Visits have more than halved, active usage (including borrowing and using PCs) has nearly halved and PC usage and attendances at events have more than halved.

18. **What we do not yet know are the individual impacts of the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours.** Once the latest comparative performance data is published by CIPFA, we will be able to see the rate at which the performance of other authorities has recovered since the pandemic. This will then allow us to judge better the particular impact of the reduction in opening hours.

19. This will have had a serious adverse effect on many people's ability to take part in the digital world; on their health and wellbeing; on their participation in cultural life; and on their participation in the labour market. It will also have weakened people's sense of community.

20. Even more seriously, **the reduction in opening hours and stretched staff capacity hamper the ability of the library service to reach the people and communities who need it most and the future generation for whom a thriving library service is a passport to a better life.**

21. **Through no fault of the skilled and committed library staff or of the users who are loyal and passionate about its value, the library service is now failing.**

Options for improving the service

22. Based on the findings of this review and feedback so far, responding to these drivers will require radical change and it is proposed that the success of the review will be judged by a draft set of simple strategic outcomes shown below.

Table E.1: draft strategic outcomes for the review of library services

By three years' time, we will be able to say that the library review has achieved the following:	
Primary outcome	**Supporting outcomes**
1. We are reaching more people.	• More people are using our library service. • We reach the people who need us most in Croydon. • People know what we're offering.
2. We have improved our service to the whole community.	• We have a wide range of popular services and activities. • People across our communities enjoy what's available. • Our facilities are welcoming and attractive.
3. Our service is more efficient.	• We are delivering better value within the resources we have. • We generate more income from events and venue hire. • More people are willing to help.

23.   A set of changes have been developed designed to achieve those outcomes, but these are based on closing four poorer performing and less viable library buildings in order to free up resource to reinvest in the rest of the service.

Table E.2: options for improving the library service

Outcome	Options recommended for further work and consultation
1. We are reaching more people.	• Extend evening/weekend opening. • Review impact of Open+ in advance of further extension. • Move some libraries to better locations as opportunities arise. • Introduce 'library link' service points. • Introduce programme of outreach and marketing.
2. We have improved our service to the whole community.	• Extend programme of improved events, working with partners. • Increase community language provision. • Improve signage, entrances and interiors. • Improve libraries' IT offer. • Promote the library service's digital offer. • Train staff for more interactive role.
3. Our service is more efficient.	• Co-locate libraries and other services and closer collaboration with CALAT. • Increase IT and checkout self-service • Continue in-house management of the service and explore community management of libraries at risk of closure. • Invest in increasing the number and scope of volunteers. • Introduce income generation. • Invest in energy efficiency

Improving nine libraries by closing four

24. To free up resources for re-investing in the wider library service, all thirteen libraries have been reviewed. Nine libraries are recommended to be retained, with proposals for each library to be improved or remodelled, often working in partnership with other services and community organisations.

Table E.3: libraries to be retained

Library	Main changes proposed to the library
Ashburton	• Upgrade the interior design of the library.
Central	• Look for an alternative location in a more suitable building at the heart of the changing shopping district.
Coulsdon	• Explore the remodelling of the library. • Invest in refurbishing the library's interior.
New Addington	• Research the barriers to library use in New Addington and introduce active outreach. Explore new partnership model for services in the area
Norbury	• Review the operating model for the building including sharing or tenancy to generate income and footfall.
Purley	• Seek a better location and building for Purley Library and explore new partnership opportunities.
Selsdon	• Introduce improved signage and market its presence.
South Norwood	• Explore opportunities to develop plans for an improved community facility jointly with the Samuel Coleridge Taylor youth centre.
Thorton Heath	• Invest in minor refurbishment.

25. Four libraries are recommended to be considered for closure, subject to detailed consultation and further research and analysis and the development of mitigations of the impact of the changes.

26. An initial equalities impact analysis has been undertaken and this will need to be refined further through the consultation period, with a particular focus on areas affected by the closures. The impacts on people in need and with protected characteristics will require careful attention.

Table E.4: recommendations for libraries to be considered for closure

Library	Recommendations
Bradmore Green	• Consider targeted outreach work on the Tollers Estate. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.
Broad Green	• Research the barriers to library use in local areas of high deprivation for active outreach. • Assess the impact on the different ethnic groups in the catchment area and of the wider equalities impact. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.
Sanderstead	• Explore the level of community interest in retaining the building. • Explore the particular impacts on people with mobility issues that might prevent them making use of another library. • Explore options for Library Link provision to serve the community impacted by closure.
Shirley	• Consult Bromley Council over potential arrangements for Croydon residents to use West Wickham Library. • Explore the particular needs of residents in the most deprived LSOAs. • Explore potential mitigations for the older community in the catchment area. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.

27.   **Saving money by closing some libraries would release significant resources which could fund many of the improvements recommended and transform the ability of the service to encourage more people to use the service, especially those that need it most.**

Next steps and consultations

28.   **The last rounds of consultation demonstrated strong opposition to library closures and the libraries proposed for closure have strong local support.** There will need to be detailed engagement with local communities and community groups over their views of the proposals, the options considered and the alternatives.

29.   **This will form part of a wider consultation with the public and voluntary and public sector organisations across the borough.** Sufficient time will be allowed and efforts made to reach residents across the borough, not just library users or those areas with a library building.

30.   The Council will consider the feedback from consultation in 2024 before taking a decision drawing on wider information and further analysis of the options. **The proposals set out in this report are, at this stage, formative proposals. The process of consultation and further research and analysis is designed to improve them with the help of the public, staff and partner organisations.**

1. Introduction

Purpose of and background to the report

1.1 This report sets out the research findings from Phases 1-2 of Croydon Council's Library Service Review, with a set of key findings and recommendations to be explored further in the next phase. This report covers Phases 1-2 of the project (July to November 2023).

1.2 Croydon Council is facing significant financial challenges and must continue to drive improvements in the long-term sustainability of its library services and other assets.

1.3 Building on the extensive feedback of previous consultations, the Council wants to work closely with Croydon residents and partners to identify a set of future options for the services that can be positive and helpful, as well as help address the Council's financial situation.

1.4 Through the project's engagement activities, the Council seeks to understand the impact of the changes made following previous consultations and to better understand what residents truly need in the future. This is set against the difficult backdrop of the UK's economic situation and immediate 'cost of living' pressures on people.

1.5 Libraries are considered 'the front door' to Croydon's public services and they continue to be highly valued despite the ongoing cost pressures that the services have faced. These pressures are contributing to the ongoing need for service changes locally (and nationally) in recent years.

1.6 The Library Service Review has been tasked to explore and discuss a number of key areas, including:

- The emerging needs of Croydon residents post-Covid, building on the work of previous consultations.

- The future options for library service delivery that are sustainable long-term and will align with other transformational work underway.

- The current library service offer, including opening hour options and weekend opening potential.

- The physical estate, including the current costs/benefits per site, the benefits of targeted capital investment in physical fabric improvements, and the quantity of buildings in comparison to other Councils.

- Opportunities for more community managed buildings and/or colocation working with local partners.

- Opportunities for working more closely and efficiently with local partners to achieve common local goals.

- Opportunities for greater technology use and technology enabled access, including the potential for offering longer opening hours for residents.

> • How a more resilient and locally tailored service offer could be delivered from a different physical and financial asset base, including the assignment of staff to particular sites and new income generation ideas.

1.7 The timetable for the review is summarised below.

Table 1.1: summary of Phases 1-4 and indicative timescales by month.

Phase	Summary of purpose and outcomes
Phase 1: Discovery (July-Oct 2023)	• Asking people to contribute their thoughts and ideas to help the Council continue to deliver the best services possible within the money it has available. • Talking to local politicians, senior leaders and key partners to help us explore their ambitions for these vital public services, as well as understand what has worked well (and less well) in the past.
Phase 2: Option development (Sept-Nov 2023)	• Taking the ideas suggested to us so far to help the Council develop a set of possible future options for the services. • These future options will be prepared ready for public consultation from January onwards.
Phase 3: Public consultation (Feb 2024 - April 2024)	• Speaking with Croydon's residents, politicians, senior leaders and key partners to seek their feedback on what they like, and don't like, about the future options
Phase 4: Implementation (May 2024 onwards)	• Informed by the Phase 3 feedback, the Council will review the proposals and options available and agree the new model for the service. • The new service option(s) will begin to be implemented from May 2024 onwards. • Croydon's residents will continue to be kept informed on the changes to services, with the intention of reflecting on the impact of these changes, again in discussion with Croydon residents, within the next 12-24 months.

Our approach and scope

1.8 The Council commissioned Activist Group, specialists in engagement, research and advice on library services, to provide independent support working in collaboration with the Council's project team.

1.9 This support covers the engagement and primary research element for Phases 1-2 of the project, exploring and analysing the views, ideas and aspirations of the people and organisations who live, work and study in Croydon. This includes identifying a wide range of perspectives of the Council's library offer, its ambitions, and people's ideas for the future, which are summarised in this report.

1.10 Activist have also developed a needs analysis and evaluation framework for assessing the impact of the current library service model and opportunities and options for improvement.

Introducing the Universal Library Offers

1.11 Libraries Connected is the Library Sector Support Organisation for public libraries in England, funded by Arts Council England. They are also a membership organisation, made up of every library service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

1.12 Their Universal Library Offers 'aim to connect communities, improve wellbeing and promote equality through learning, literacy and cultural activity' and can be used to describe what libraries or community centres can offer people.

1.13 We have summarised the Universal Offers in the table below. More detail about them can be read at https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/universal-library-offers.

Table 1.2: Libraries Connected's Universal Library Offers

Offer and key principles	Summary
Reading • *Engage, Imagine, Discover*	To build a literate and confident society by developing, delivering and promoting creative reading activities in libraries.
Information and Digital • *Inform, Inspire, Innovate*	To ensure local communities have access to quality information and digital services, to learn new skills and to feel safe online.
Culture and creativity • *Explore, Create, Participate*	To enable local communities to access and participate in a variety of quality and diverse arts and cultural experiences through local libraries.

Offer and key principles	Summary
Health and wellbeing • *Healthier, Happier, Connected*	To support the health and wellbeing of local people and communities through services that inform, engage and connect.

Employment and Learning

1.14   The current edition of the Universal Library Offers does not give sufficient space to communities' need for employment and learning support, a key theme in Croydon's Mayoral Business Plan (2022-26) and Croydon Libraries' own plan and current work with partners including CALAT. We have therefore included this as an additional 'offer' which we have analysed in our engagement and research.

1.15   The offer is summarised as:

- o   To enable people to realise their potential by accessing advice and learning that aids their employment prospects and skills.
- o   Through targeted advice to people looking for work or starting a business, including job clubs and CV support, start-up business support and shared workspaces.
- o   Through support for urgent needs, including access to rights advice and legal services, signposting to food banks and emergency information.
- o   Providing pathways into formal adult learning and vocational training.

1.16   The four core Universal Offers are also underpinned by the 'Children's Promise' (in partnership with the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL), and the 'Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise', developed by Share the Vision. The aims of these have been woven across our analysis of the four core Universal Library Offers.

Table 1.3: cross-cutting offers

Promise	Goal
Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise	• That the almost two million blind and partially sighted people in the UK can visit a fully accessible library service, that has a local collection of accessible reading materials and information in physical or digital forms.
Children's Promise	• Every child and young person in libraries is inspired to read for pleasure, has access to a diverse range of materials, can engage in a variety of digital activities and can take part in activities that improve their well-being.

How we've gone about the research

1.17   We used four main methods for gathering people's views and other relevant data:

- **Interviews** with key Council senior officers and service leads.

- **External briefings** with Friends Groups, community groups and members of the public.

- **Desktop review of previous consultation findings and feedback,** where members of the public were consulted on previous service options, ideas and proposals.

- **Staff 'idea generation' workshops** with a cross-section of library service staff.

- **Desktop analysis of performance data, other local data, benchmarking data and wider ideas from elsewhere about what works.**

How to read the rest of this report

1.18   The chapters of this report and its appendices are grouped together as follows:

- *Chapter 2 gives an overview of Croydon's library service and trends affecting the library sector.*

- *Chapters 3 to 7 assess how Croydon Libraries' are currently able to address meet local needs under each of the Universal Offer themes.*

- *Chapter 8 summarises the findings from our engagement and research.*

- *Chapters 9 and 10 provide our conclusions about the severe challenges facing the service.*

- *Chapter 11 sketches out a new vision and model for the service to address the problems we have identified.*

- *Chapter 12 summarises our conclusions and recommendations.*

- *The Appendices to the report contain full details of the options for change including addressing closures and full data from our engagement and research.*

2. An overview of libraries in Croydon

Introduction

2.1   In this section, to help set the scene, we provide an overview of Croydon's library service. We summarise the current service offer, how the services are organised, and explore broader trends that are influencing the library sector.

Summary of the service

2.2   Croydon's library service is currently delivered over 13 buildings grouped into three areas: North, Central and South. The service also delivers a home library service and supports delivery of library services at Upper Norwood Library Hub, situated in Lambeth but jointly owned by Croydon and Lambeth and operated by Lambeth Council and the Upper Norwood Library Trust. The library group type informs the opening hours and the extent of the offer available:

Table 2.1: Croydon's area, branch and local library locations

Type of library	North Area	Central Area	South Area
Area Library	Thornton Heath	Croydon Central Library	Selsdon
Branch Libraries	South Norwood Norbury	New Addington Ashburton	Coulsdon Purley
Local Libraries	Broad Green	Shirley	Sanderstead Bradmore Green

2.3   Croydon Council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museum Act (PLMA, 1964) to "provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof". Though the precise definition of comprehensive and efficient is not specified, the authority must have regard to:

- providing adequate stock and resources for lending to the public, sufficient in range and quantity for the borough population of adult and children

- encourage use of the library service from both adults and children, providing advice and information to support this

2.4   The statutory duty is superintended by DCMS (the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) who have the power to intervene and call a local enquiry when a library service fails (or is suspected of failing) to provide the required service including the investigation of complaints that the library authority has failed to carry out its duties in line with the Act and to issue it with an order to carry out those duties.

2.5   The Council is also advised, under the non-statutory guidance for public libraries, to develop its library services in consultation with local residents and undertake statutory consultation on any significant service changes.

2.6   Croydon's statutory library service offer uses the Libraries Connected Universal Offers as a framework for developing and delivering a comprehensive public library service.

2.7   Through this project the library service have produced detailed site reports for each library outlining current usage and local information. The service have also produced a range of maps to explore the service reach and impact across the borough. (see Appendix F).

2.8   Some headline figures for the library service overall, current trends and benchmarking are detailed below. The most recent CIPFA performance data for comparisons with other library services is 2021/22 data. Further analysis will be undertaken when the next dataset is released covering performance for 2022/23.

2.9   Croydon libraries are currently open for 344 hours per week, with 296 of these a fully staffed service and 48 enabled through self-service technology.

2.10   When benchmarked for revenue expenditure per head Croydon is 15th out of 16 comparator services.

2.11   When benchmarked for number of library visits per head in the last year for which data is available Croydon ranks 15th out of 16.

2.12   When benchmarked for the number of library loans per head for which data is available Croydon ranks 17th out of 18

        (NB the total denominators change depending on the number of services who have responded to that question)

2.13   Footfall into the libraries for the first six months of 2023/24 is only 43% of the same period for 2019/2 whilst Active Users (members who have used their card in the last 12 months) are at 58% of the same point in 2019, amounting to less than 10% of the population.

2.14   Whilst there has been an increase in library visits and issues in 2023/24 this is still at a low rate relative to other comparable boroughs and as a proportion of the population. Whilst the need for library services remains high, as evidenced in levels of educational attainment, health inequality, isolation and digital exclusion, the reduction in opening hours and stretched staff capacity hamper the ability of the library service to reach the people and communities who need it most and the future generation for whom a thriving library service is a passport to a better life.

2.15   Without a change in the model and reallocation of the resources available, the service is unlikely to be able to meet the needs of Croydon's residents and in that sense it could be considered to be failing.

2.16   Further detail on the libraries' performance data can be found in Section 9.

How we got here

2.17   Croydon's library service has undergone substantial change and transition over the last six years. Having been previously outsourced to Carillion, in 2018 the service was brought back in house following that company's collapse. A restructure was undertaken in 2019 with a budget reduction of £300k made.

2.18   In 2019 a new Library Plan was approved and the service joined The Libraries Consortium or TLC (at that time London Libraries Consortium), a network of 20 library services which share a library catalogue and book stock. Investment was also made in the digital infrastructure of the libraries and self-service access technology was installed.

2.19   In March 2020 the library buildings were closed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and government mandated lockdowns with a gradual reopening taking place across the network later in the year from July 2020 with Select & Collect services, and on 9 September, Central Library, then Selsdon, Ashburton, Thornton Heath, and New Addington opened for browsing & appointment only IT access. There was a further lockdown in November 2020 with libraries reopening gradually in April 2021. In this interim period, several libraries served as testing centres, including Broad Green which was closed until August 2021 and the last to reopen.

2.20   In November 2020 Croydon Council issued a Section 114 notice stating that it could no longer deliver a balanced budget. This necessitated a review of services across the council with a requirement to make significant financial savings. Proposals were developed to reduce the libraries service budget by £500k by closing five libraries. Consultation on these proposals was held between January and March 2021 with a decision taken in May 2021 to explore alternative approaches to make the savings.

2.21   Further consultation took place between June and July 2021 on the following options:

-   Reduce service hours by 21% across the borough

-   Outsource all libraries

-   Reduce service hours (2 days per week) in eight libraries and create five community run libraries

2.22   Following consideration of the consultation responses, the decision was taken in October 2021 by Croydon's Cabinet to proceed with the first option including through increased use of self-service access, volunteers and partnerships.

2.23   From April 2022 the number of staffed hours was then reduced from 566 to 296. In May 2023 self-service access was enabled at Selsdon Library followed by Norbury Library in October 2023.

2.24   However, as will be analysed in more detail in chapter 9, these mitigations have not functioned as originally intended, significantly extending the reduction in opening hours

as experienced by residents. The severity of this impact has been reflected in the feedback from respondents during our engagement.

Management of the service

2.25 The Croydon Library Plan (2019-2028) sets out the strategic aims for the development of the service under three pillars:

- Inform – connecting residents to information, advice and services that will benefit them

- Involve – a service that is shaped by residents and easily adapts to meet the changing needs of the communities we serve

- Inspire – creative library spaces that offer residents opportunities to have fun, learn and connect with others

2.26 These strategic aims were underpinned by four outcomes. Though delivery of the plan has been severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Council's financial difficulties, some progress has been made towards these outcomes, as highlighted below.

Table 2.2: Croydon Library Plan (2019-2028) – outcomes and achievements

Outcome	Achievements
A library service designed around the needs of our residents and communities	Joined the TLC in 2019 providing significant increase to available books and e-resources for Croydon residents
Croydon Libraries as the Front Door to the Council enabling services to be delivered locally	Improved the digital infrastructure of the libraries Strategic role for libraries as outlets for localities working including vaccination , consultation outlets for other departments, election stations and engagement points for Council and voluntary programme tours (Hate Crime, Fostering, Digital Safety, Warmer Homes etc)
Libraries at the heart of Croydon's cultural offer, celebrating the written and spoken word in particular	Regular author talks taking place and poetry programme delivered with Croydon poet laureate The libraries have also been used as venues for London Borough of Culture activity

Modern, welcoming, inclusive and accessible library facilities and buildings	Self-service access implemented at Selsdon and Norbury Libraries
	Library app launched

2.27   Within Croydon Council the library service sits within the Culture and Community Safety department within the directorate of Sustainable Communities, Regeneration and Economic Recovery.

2.28   Reporting into the Head of Culture, Leisure and Libraries, the Libraries Services Manager leads the service. The wider management team includes a Buildings and Systems Manager, an Operations Manager, a Development and Marketing Manager and a Volunteer Co-ordinator. Responsibilities for the overall operations, premises, programme, strategic partnerships, outreach, marketing, stock management, performance management and service development projects sit with this team of five.

2.29   The frontline operational teams are made up of 3 FTE Senior Supervisors, 4.5 FTE Supervisors, 8 FTE Senior Library Assistants, 22 FTE Library Assistants, 1.52 FTE Library Support Assistants and 0.67 FTE courier.

Figure 2.1: Croydon library service – structure chart
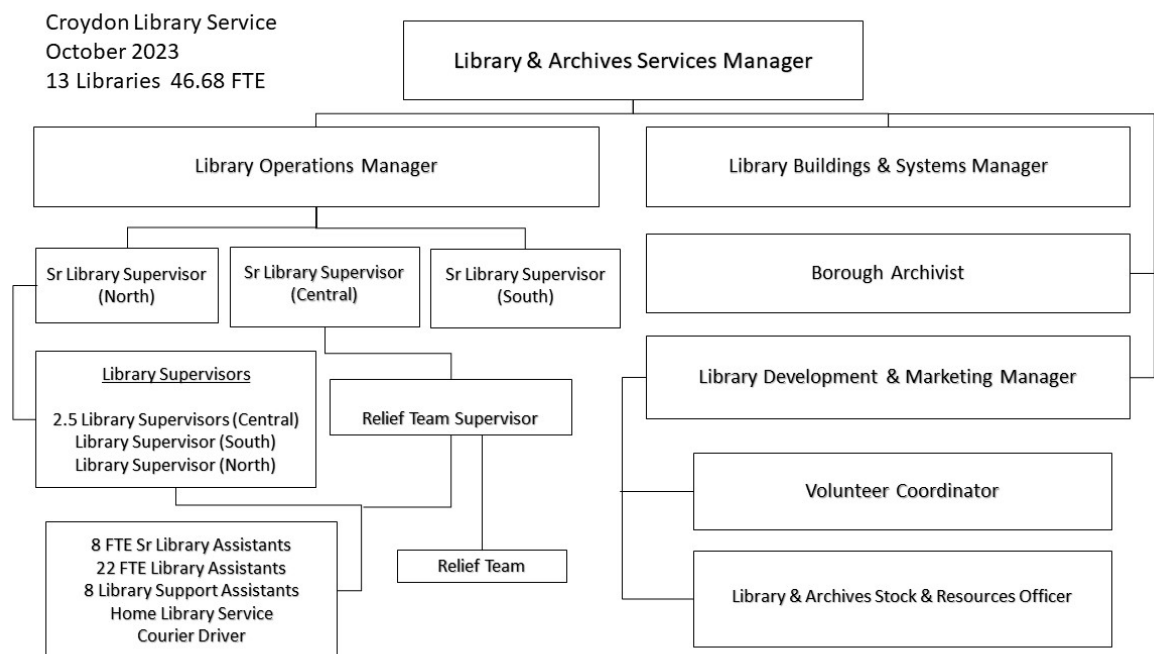
2.30   The Croydon Archives service also sits under the management of the Library Services Officer and is staffed by 1 FTE Borough Archivist post and 0.5 FTE Collections Access Officer post. Library assistants also assist in staffing the archive Research Room on a rota basis.

The external environment and how libraries are responding

2.31 Below we summarise the main aspects of the external environment in which this review is taking place, with key trends affecting the public library and local government sectors, and outline some of the ways in which the public library sector has attempted to adapt.

Austerity and funding

2.32 Reductions in local government funding since 2010 have contributed towards spending on public libraries falling nationally by 47%. The current administration's Levelling Up programme has also sought to redirect resource outside of London, though some areas in London, including Croydon, have been able to benefit from funding under this scheme.

2.33 As noted elsewhere, despite the reduction in Arts Council England investment in London, libraries have become more central to ACE strategies, recognising the extensive reach of public libraries in communities, particularly among those who don't traditionally engage with arts, and have greater needs across a number of areas including health and wellbeing, and learning and skills, as well as libraries' role as trusted, free spaces.

2.34 Broadly, public libraries have responded to financial pressures with three strategies, not mutually exclusive, but with different implications. The first is to cut their cloth accordingly, or 'salami-slice' libraries' staffing, hours and sites. Pursued in a vacuum this generally leads to falling usage and a weakening of libraries' effectiveness and efficiency, making them a softer target for further cuts, and rendering local authorities liable to challenge under their statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.

2.35 The second strategy is to move away from trying to be 'all things to all people', which has been a temptation in some places, leading to a dilution of service focus and quality. Such a strategy is probably no longer viable for many local authorities. Alternatively service reviews are increasingly targeting local need more precisely and tailoring each library's offer to its population's specific profile and needs.

2.36 The third strategy is to try and position public libraries more centrally within local frameworks for delivering corporate objectives for health and wellbeing, economic development, employment and skills, arts and culture etc, both for the specific benefits of activities within libraries, and as gateways to other specialist support. While this has proved effective in many places, public libraries often struggle to make progress because they lack the influence or recognition within existing national and local frameworks to make their case effectively, or robust data required by commissioners and decision-makers. However, library services which have focused on this strategy are more likely to be successful in attracting additional funding now available from Arts Council England than those merely retrenching.

Pandemic recovery and cost of living crisis

Communities are grappling with the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, inflation and cost-of-living crisis, which have all exacerbated inequalities and increased demand for support including mental health services, isolation and school catch-up.

The closure of public libraries at the beginning of the pandemic caused normal visits and usage to collapse. This had a huge impact on library strategies, income and relationship with residents, many of whom relied on libraries to maintain social contacts, use the internet, access services and take part in affordable activities.

However, libraries' response has emphasised their role as (often the only) free, universal social spaces left in communities, providing warm or cool spaces in extreme weather and social contact for those who are isolated, as well as vital access to the internet and specialist support.

Digital shift

There have been rapid advances in technology and its application to almost every aspect of daily life. The pandemic necessitated a rapid adjustment to online working, shopping, study and social interaction, and although for many things there has been an adjustment back to more personal, direct contact, the legacy of these changes is that many providers now prefer users to access online, but also many individuals have got used to this and find it more convenient.

Although 93% of UK households now have internet access at home[1], this means that 7% of UK households cannot access the internet at home, which represents some 4.6 million UK residents. Not everyone is equally confident or comfortable with using technology, or indeed wishes to. Hence there are still a significant minority of people who are excluded from this 'online world', not just for the activities where there remains the in-person option, such as shopping, but also to access a range of public services, to search and apply for jobs, or to look for a home to rent. Looking forward, rapid advances in technology including AI will no doubt render much of this picture obsolete in ways difficult to forecast.

Public libraries have exhibited strengths and weaknesses in adapting to digital technology both in the short-term and long-term since the introduction of computer and internet access as part of the core library offer. Public Library services (hampered by poor local government IT platforms and support) have been generally slow to catch up with the user-focused commercial environment of online retail and downloads. However, more recently and spurred by the pandemic, the online public library offer has been improving rapidly, demonstrated in the significant increase in users for ebooks and other digital material. Croydon's membership of The Library's Consortium has transformed its digital offer.

The pandemic has also emphasised that the public library's role is bridging the digital gap for those without access, devices, skills or confidence to use technology, as well as providing social space to avoid isolation for people of all ages otherwise using content online at home.

Retreat from the high street

Another long-term trend accelerated by the pandemic and the move to remote working and online shopping has been the decline of high street retail. This has affected the mobility patterns of citizens, usage of public amenities and the viability of many existing library sites.

Many local authorities are reviewing their existing library network in light of these changes, or alternatively seeking to anchor public libraries in a high street experience more focused on 'experience' than 'retail', or alongside new housing developments, but implementing such far-reaching changes to urban planning are complex and long-term.

Comprehensive and efficient, and non-discriminatory

Over the last decade, local government proposals to manage collapsing budgets by reducing library services has highlighted the statutory duty on Councils to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service under the 1964 Public Libraries Act, and to ensure that changes are compliant with more recent equalities legislation. Although the definition of 'comprehensive and efficient' is less than clear, both the DCMS duty to superintend the Act and campaigning groups' potential to initiate independent legal proceedings puts additional emphasis on the process of needs assessment, consultation and equalities impact assessment.

Climate action

The climate crisis response and challenge to meet net zero commitments weighs heavily on local government and its physical estate particularly at a time of financial crisis.

Public libraries have responded nationally by creating the Green Libraries Partnership, which, as well as supporting library services to address their own responsibilities to reduce the carbon impact of library buildings have a mission to put public libraries at the heart of environmental action in their communities.

About Croydon

2.37   Croydon is the largest of all the London boroughs in terms of population, with approximately 390,800 residents (ONS Census 2021) and the population is growing. The borough population recorded in Census 2001 was 330,587 and in the 2011 Census it had increased to 363,378. Census 2021 estimates 390,800 Croydon residents and this is expected to increase to just under 500,000 by 2050.

Table 2.3: Summary of key demographics, includes (ONS Census 2021):

- Nearly a quarter of Croydon's population (23.1%) are aged 17 years and under compared to the average for London of 21.6%. In Croydon, 63.3% of its residents are in the 18-64 years age band compared to 66.6% in the same age band in London. Croydon has a higher proportion (13.6%) of residents 65 years or over compared to the average for London which is 11.9%. Employment and prosperity (and poverty).

- Croydon is an ethnically diverse place with 51.6% of the population from a global majority background with the largest groups being people of Black ethnicities at 22.6% and people of Asian ethnicities at 17.5%.

- 82.4% of people reported feeling in very good health of good health overall, though 15.9% reported that their daily activities are limited a little or a lot by a long term health problem or disability. There are also significant health inequalities within the borough which we will explore further below.

- While the overall level of deprivation has fallen between the IMD 2015 and the IMD 2019 there are five neighbourhoods in the borough which fall within the top 10% of the most deprived areas in the country. These are situated in Thornton Heath, Broad Green, Selhurst, New Addington and Shirley North. The North and East of the borough continue to be more deprived than the south overall.

- The job density level in Croydon is 0.58. This is much lower than the London average of 1 and the average for Great Britain which is 0.85.

- Croydon is a major economic centre in London and a primary retail, leisure and cultural destination for the South East. It is also a major contributor of labour and skills to the London economy and is recognised in the London Plan as an important strategic location for business activity and transport infrastructure.

- Over the last decade Croydon's economy has been hampered by an overdependence on retail, business services and public sector jobs and a surplus of lower grade office accommodation. The latest economic development strategies and regeneration plans recognise the need to focus on supporting local business, driving economic growth, and facilitating new business and inward investment.

- Croydon's cultural economy has also been severely impacted by the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, both of which have affected audience numbers and behaviour. The funding landscape for culture in London is also more challenging following strategic decisions by central government to redirect funding support outside of the city.

- Croydon is the current London Borough of Culture and the Council is delivering a cultural programme between April 2023 and March 2024 under this award. This programme is creating opportunities to explore new partnerships and ways of delivering and enabling culture in the borough but further funding beyond the year will remain a challenge for the Council and the cultural sector.

The Council's transformation plans

2.38   Croydon's finances, like those of the wider local government sector, are under strain from inflationary pressures and increasing demand for essential social care, housing and welfare services. Croydon's financial challenge is also compounded by significant, and independently well documented, local historic legacy (governance, financial, service delivery and structural) issues.

2.39   The Council first issued a Section 114 notice in November 2020 with further notices issued in December 2020 and November 2022. Additional support measures were introduced following the last notice and the Council is not currently under Section 114 restrictions.

2.40   However, the financial position of the Council remains serious and the current Medium Term Financial Statement (MTFS) reports that before allowance for savings, efficiencies and any further government support, there is a budget deficit of £75m forecast for 2024-25, increasing to £137m by 2027-28

2.41   The Council has initiated a wide-ranging transformation programme to review operations and costs across the organisation and to improve efficiency and bring service costs in line with benchmarking of nearest neighbours.

2.42   One of the workstreams for the transformation programme is a review of the library service offer to consider if the current model of operating thirteen buildings on a part time basis provides best value and to explore alternative service models to generate better value and higher impact with the resource available. This project is not forecast to generate significant revenue budget savings for the Council but to improve the overall efficiency of the service and the Council's asset base.

2.43   Following the issuing of the first Section 114 notice the Council has been working with an Improvement and Assurance Panel, appointed by central government to support the Council to address their financial difficulties. In July 2023 the panel's role was made statutory and strengthened to allow them the power to intervene should they feel that the Council was not delivering its Best Value Duty for residents.

2.44   The panel has produced an exit strategy which sets out the panel's plan for leaving Croydon in July 2025. The exit strategy has been developed by the panel, in close partnership with the council, and highlights the strong commitment by both to resolve the challenges.

2.45   The content of the Exit Plan closely aligns with the Mayor's Business Plan (2022-2026), the overarching strategic document for the Council services. The priority outcomes in this plan are:

- Outcome 1: Getting our finances right

- Outcome 2: A place of opportunity,

- Outcome 3: Children and young people,

- Outcome 4: Cleaner, safer and healthier,

- Outcome 5: Living healthier independent lives,

2.46   The Mayor's Business Plan commits that the Council will listen to, respect and work with partner organisations, Croydon's diverse communities, the voluntary sector, and develop our workforce to deliver the outcomes and though challenging the current circumstances do enable the organisation to work in new ways with partners to respond to need and demand in the borough.

Summary of findings

Key findings

2.47   In the table below, we have summarised our key findings from this section:

Table 2.4: Introducing libraries in Croydon - our key findings

- The social and economic changes of recent years have created challenges for library services but they also generate opportunities to reach new audiences with a library offer and make sure libraries are relevant to more people's lives

- Croydon's levels of deprivation and population wellbeing have improved overall but entrenched inequalities remain, particularly in the North and East of the borough and this needs targeted attention

- It's important to build a wide coalition of partners and residents to deliver services which understand and respond to local need and can deliver best value with limited funding available

- Population growth and demand will continue in the borough. We need to be creative about how a library offer can have the greatest impact and recognize it wont be possible to do everything

- The reductions made to the library service budgets in 2021 have impeded recovery of library usage and services post Covid-19 with rates of use recovering more slowly than in neighbouring boroughs

3. Reading: what our analysis tells us

Context

3.1   The aim of the Reading Universal Offer is: '**To build a literate and confident society by developing, delivering and promoting creative reading activities in libraries'**.

3.2   Research has indicated that reading for pleasure is the single biggest indicator of a child's future success – more than their family circumstances, their parents' educational background or their income (OECD 2011). It also builds confidence, empathy, language and communication skills and positive wellbeing.

3.3   However, reading for pleasure is at its lowest levels in 18 years; fewer than one in two (47.8%) children aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed reading in 2022, the lowest level since 2005[5]. This is even lower for children growing up in poverty with one in ten children eligible for free school meals reporting that they don't own a single book (NLT, 2022).

3.4   Literacy is also a key functional skill which is integral to people's independence, health, education, employment and life outcomes. In England 16.4% of adults (7.1 million people) can be described as having "very poor literacy skills." (NLT, 2022)

3.5   Support for literacy in English is also particularly important in diverse communities where English is spoken as an additional language, to support access to services, employment, educational outcomes and enable independent living.

Need in the Borough

3.6   According to the National Literacy Trust's literacy score mapping (2017) which measure literacy need in each constituency in England, Croydon North and Croydon Central were ranked 131 and 135 respectively out of 533 placing both in the top 25% of highest need in the country. Croydon South was ranked at 319, indicating the inequality in literacy levels between the north and central areas of the borough and the south.

3.7   Croydon has the highest population of children and young people of the London boroughs with one in four (23.1%) of the population aged 0-17 years (ONS Census 2021). This figure is expected to continue growing in line with the population creating further pressure on education and school services. The borough also has the highest number of children with experience of care in London.

3.8   21.7% of the Croydon population are students and whilst attainment levels at Foundation are good, levels at KS2 KS4 and KS5 are below London averages.

3.9   Take up of funded early years education places is also below London average and the borough is seeing an adverse impact from the Covid-19 pandemic on school readiness.

3.10   65% of children in Croydon fall in to the in bottom five deciles for income deprivation affecting children index with 15,578 under 16 year olds living in relative low income and 24.4% of primary and secondary children are eligible for free school meals.

3.11   The overall census data shows that 16% of people in the borough have a main language other than English but less than 3% either cannot speak English well, or at all. However Croydon has a substantial refugee population who may not have been well represented through the Census.

3.12   Generally, educational attainment and literacy trends correlate with areas of deprivation in the borough with people with no qualifications concentrated in areas around Central Croydon and the south-eastern edge of the borough.

How we are currently addressing these needs

3.13   The collection of physical and digital material available to Croydon residents has been significantly expanded by our membership of The Libraries Consortium. However, certain types of material are in higher demand and current investment limits do not keep pace, particularly board and picture books for younger readers which naturally have a higher rate of attrition.

3.14   Digital resources including e-books and e-audio are incredibly popular in Croydon making up 31% of all loans in 2022/23.

3.15   Reading and literacy events taking place through our libraries include:

- 20 weekly sessions for under 5's and a weekly reading club for children up to aged 8.

- Summer Reading Challenge in partnership with The Reading Agency which reached nearly 2,000 children in 2023.

- Adult reading groups including specialised groups dedicated to Crime, Non-Fiction and LGBTQ+ relevant texts.

- Shared Reading Groups, also known as Reading Aloud (from The Reader Organisation) where ability to read is not required to join. This has received additional Arts Council funding.

3.16   The reduced opening hours since 2021 severely limit the capacity for outreach and targeted engagement of those most in need. This has been raised as particularly challenging for working people generally and families with working parents.

3.17   Staff and volunteers have recently undergone training to develop the reading aloud programme further with the Reading Retreat scheme. This programme also supports the libraries health offer as the sessions provide reading activity for people who may struggle to read independently as a result of health conditions and disability.

3.18   The library also regularly host celebration events and author talks to generate excitement around books and reading and to showcase new and diverse authors. This has recently included hosting the London stop of the Black British Book Festival tour.

3.19   The library service has also worked in partnership with care homes and VCFS services to deliver the home library offer and enable access to books for those who are unable to visit a library or are unaware of the offer.

3.20   The library service has also recently been awarded some public health grant funding to deliver a targeted programme of early years and family support to develop a shared reading habit and promote the links between reading and school readiness in 2024.

What others have done

3.21   The National Literacy Trust have piloted a targeted model of place-based reading development through their Literacy Hubs. Piloted in three areas of low literacy (Middlesborough, Bradford and Derby) the Hubs use four pillars to deliver an improvement in reading and literacy rates in the locality which provides a useful model to replicate:

- Auditing the need and identifying local priorities and key stakeholders.

- Developing a strategy for the long-term goals and identifying the resource needed.

- Delivering a targeted marketing and information campaign matched to key demographics.

- Developing partnerships with local businesses, the VCFS, education and local authority bodies.

- Delivering a range of interventions to test different approaches to literacy development with different demographics and groups.

What people have told us

3.22   In the table below, we have summarised what people have told us about Reading, based on our desktop review of the previous consultations, our interviews and external briefings.

3.23   Our full analysis and more detailed findings are in Appendix E.

Table 3.1: Reading – what people have told us

- Feedback to the March 2021 consultation told the Council that one of the most important library services offered to respondents was browsing and borrowing books. Lack of Resources (books, newspapers) and a demand for more to be available ('better resources, including books') were main concerns.   - Many interviewees have cited a need for greater book stock availability and choices (especially more copies of the most popular books), as well as a growing need for stock in different languages as Croydon's communities continue to grow and diversify.

- We have heard how extended opening hours, particularly evenings and weekends outside traditional 9-5 working hours, would enable greater access to libraries by working families (especially fathers and male carers) to have early years reading and literacy experiences with their children.

Summary of findings

Key findings

3.24   In the table below, we have summarised our key findings from this section:

Table 3.2: Reading - our key findings

- There are particular geographic areas of lower literacy and lower educational attainment in the borough and the most effective approach would involve targeted work in these areas

- There is a trend of a drop off in attainment from Foundation stage to the later Key Stages

- Many children are not benefiting from the funded early years childcare provision

- Whilst the growth in loans of digital resources may have helped to offset the impact of the reduction in hours it is not clear that these resources are being used by those who need them most

Recommendations

3.25   In the table below, we have summarised our recommendations for Phase 2:

Table 3.3: Reading - recommendations

- Reading campaign work should include a focus on school readiness to reach the families not currently accessing formal early years education.

- Reading interventions and programmes should be prioritised in areas of highest need and work needs to be done to understand the barriers to engaging in these areas.

- Further research is needed to determine the literacy and reading support required for the borough's refugee population whose needs may not be represented through the official Census statistics.

- A change in the library service model or resourcing will be needed to undertake this work as there is currently no capacity for outreach and targeted reading development

4. Health and wellbeing: what our analysis tells us

Context

4.1 The aim of the Universal Health offer is: 'To support the health and wellbeing of local people and communities through services that inform, engage and connect'.

4.2 Croydon Libraries' health offer is driven through partnership with other local bodies and groups with the libraries providing safe, accessible spaces for people to access health services. There has been significant change in the health landscape in Croydon over recent years with a strong emphasis on partnership and community leadership. There is untapped potential within the library service to play a more active role in this work.

Need in the Borough

4.3 An ageing population impacts on the demand for a range of services as people live longer with more complex needs. For example, over the last 5 years, the estimated dementia diagnosis rate for 65+ years has been increasing and has been higher than the rate in London and England for the past 2 years.

4.4 Childhood immunisation rates continue to be lower in Croydon than across London and England.

4.5 Croydon's proportion of adults (aged 18+) classified as overweight or obese is similar to the London average but it is a priority to reduce this further to reduce the risk of obesity related health conditions.

4.6 The inequality gap between life expectancy in the most and least deprived areas in Croydon is 6.2 years for females and 5.8 years for males, placing Croydon seventh and fifth highest respectively in London. (DPH report, 2022)

4.7 The impacts of Covid-19 continue to cause adverse mental health outcomes for people in the borough, particularly those from already marginalised or disadvantaged groups. (DPH report 2022).

4.8 There are a number of health inequalities between the most and least deprived wards in the borough (Selhurst and Sanderstead respectively) including prevalence of obesity, preventable deaths, emergency hospital admissions for children aged 0 to 15, low birth weight of babies and long term unemployment. (DPH report 2022).

4.9 Under the One Croydon Alliance, each locality has been given a health score using the Acorn Wellbeing type. Using this metric the South East (including the two New Addington wards) and the Central West (including Broad Green and Selhurst wards) localities had the highest number of households with health challenges.

How we are currently addressing these needs

4.10   Croydon libraries deliver a range of activities with health and wellbeing benefits. These include:

- Games clubs, knit and natter groups, befriending activity and a men's discussion group which all work to combat social isolation and promote community connection

- A Home Library offer for 150 residents unable to physically access library buildings

- Community gardening initiatives which provide opportunities for residents to meet new people, work outdoors and cultivate growing space

- Hosting health partners for delivery of vaccination clinics and health information events

- Stocking the 'Reading Well' book collections which helps citizens to better understand and manage health conditions and benefit from mood boosting fiction books.

4.11   Each of the One Croydon locality areas has a Local Community Plan which has been developed through the Local Voluntary Partnerships of residents, community groups and health and social care professionals. The plans are place based, strengths-based, outcomes-focused plans designed to tackle health inequalities in the locality. These plans then inform the delivery of commissioning, funding and community health provision and activity in each locality.

4.12   Croydon NHS Health Services published an Integrating Care in Croydon strategy (2023-28) including a commitment to open more community wellbeing hubs to expand capacity in early prevention, provide more support for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and further develop the locality based work in each of Croydon's areas.

4.13   Croydon Libraries will also be part of a new three year public health funded programme delivering universal and targeted interventions with creative and physical activities to promote mental wellbeing using the 5 ways framework. This programme will enable more health activities to be delivered in libraries, strengthen the library outreach offer and develop an evidence base for the library health offer in Croydon.

What others have done

4.14   There are many innovative models of integrated health offers in library services around the country. Merton libraries have installed health information stations in their libraries which allow visitors to take a basic health care check including BMI and blood pressure with an ancillary programme of health activity delivered in partnership with Nuffield Health.

4.15   Hillingdon Libraries have pioneered dementia inclusive design and programming into their libraries through an initial funding programme from their public health team which enabled staff training, delivery of dementia inclusive activities and engagement with the local Dementia Action Alliance and the installation of interactive Tovertafels which stimulate cognitive and social functions through digital activities.

4.16   In November 2022 Manchester City Council opened a new education and health hub in Gorton, integrating the library service with a GP surgery, job centre and adult learning service creating a one-stop-shop for local people to access health and social care services, employment support and a café.

What people have told us

4.17   In the table below, we have summarised what people have told us about Health and wellbeing, based on our desktop review of the previous consultations, our interviews and external briefings.

4.18   Our full analysis and more detailed findings are in Appendix E.

Table 4.1: Health and wellbeing – what people have told us

- Feedback to the July 2021 consultation told the Council that respondents saw libraries as a 'lifeline' that were 'important for wellbeing' and that this should be recognised.

- Croydon's library staff offer compassionate in-person support that was highly valued by consultation respondents. Residents of all ages do not want to lose access to this support in any future service changes.

- There is understood to be a significant and growing need for more mental health support across Croydon.

- Libraries also offer warm socialization spaces to people. A library is somewhere they go to be helped, or to receive signposting to wellbeing advice from other services.

- There is a growing local interest in environmental and climate-related activities, perhaps as part of any future wellbeing support offer for residents.

Summary of findings

Key findings

4.19   In the table below, we have summarised our key findings from this section:

Table 4.2: Health and wellbeing - our key findings

- There are a number of health inequalities across the borough and between demographic groups. New Addington and Broad Green consistently feature as the areas with the highest prevalence of inequality

- Community led approaches have been effective in delivering services and engaging residents and health partners to focus on local need.

- There are opportunities to deliver a health offer which allows for both universal access and targeted support through libraries. However more work needs to be done to integrate the library offer with Croydon's public health strategies and make better links with health services such as social prescribing provision.

Recommendations

4.20   In the table below, we have summarised our recommendations for Phase 2:

Table 4.3: Health and wellbeing - recommendations

- Undertake further research work to understand the intersectional health inequalities particularly in regard to ethnicity.

- Advocate for long term strategic planning for alignment and accessibility of services in new developments.

- Develop relationships with local health networks including Croydon public health, One Croydon Alliance and Local Voluntary Partnerships to embed library services across community health provision.

5. Information and digital: what our analysis tells us

Context

5.1 The aim for the Universal Offer on Information and digital is: '**To ensure local communities have access to quality information and digital services, to learn new skills and to feel safe online**'.

5.2 Universal basic digital skills are now essential to address growing inequality, financial exclusion and social isolation as services and communication become increasingly online only. Digital literacy is also crucial in the context of rising misinformation in the news and advances in AI technology. Libraries continue to be one of the most trusted sources of information and they have a key role to play in addressing these challenges.

Need in the Borough

5.3 The London Office for Technology and Innovation (LOTI), an initiative from the Mayor of London published a research report on Digital Inclusion in London in 2022. This mapped digital exclusion across London using demographic data to identify concentrations of people most at risk of digital exclusion based on 24 personas developed to represent different risk factors for digital exclusion.

5.4 The Croydon map identifies the greatest risk in the South and East of the borough with a small corner in the North West near Norbury. This correlates to risk factors associated with older people who make up a larger proportion of the population in the Southern wards and areas of the East such as Shirley.

5.5 The south of the borough is also more rural and therefore has potentially less developed infrastructure.

5.6 Croydon has more digital exclusion than all of its neighbouring boroughs with the exception of Bromley.

How we are currently addressing these needs

5.7 Across Croydon's library network there are 200 PCs available for use at a total of 2,506 PC hours per week and free Wi-Fi in all libraries. The highest usage of available time is at the Central Library, followed by Norbury and the lowest usage is at Bradmore Green

5.8 Residents can also access the online library on the library app or online discovery portal with extensive collections of eBooks/eAudio, eMagazines and eNewspapers (in 130 languages). As previously mentioned, demand for digital materials has increased and now makes up 31% of total loans.

5.9 The online library also provides access to free training courses, reference resources and learning materials for different age groups.

5.10   In 2023 the service was awarded funding from Arts Council England (ACE) to deliver Connect Croydon, a three year partnership programme delivered with Clear Community Web (CCW) to deliver a public programme of digital skills events and a staff training programme to develop their skills and knowledge and improve the wider service offer for the public.

5.11   In 2023 the library service was awarded funding through the Libraries Improvement Fund to establish a Digital Discovery Space in the Central Library. This new facility will host creative digital skills programmes with a particular focus on reaching young people, delivered with partners. Residents of all ages will also be able to access the space to engage with events, exhibitions, the online library and the digital catalogues for the Croydon Museum and Archives. The area will also include a podcast studio to support creative expression and development in this format.

5.12   The Council's Digital Croydon team have produced three A4 printed 'How to Get Online' guides that cover a range of step by step internet basics such as connecting to the internet, understanding Wi-Fi, searching the web, creating social media accounts, and using Zoom. These guides have been distributed to over 1,000 digitally excluded residents via library service as well as local VCS organisations in the borough like Age UK Croydon, Croydon Voluntary Action, and Clear Community Web.

What others have done

5.13   Whilst a basic digital offer has existed in libraries for some time, recent changes exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic have inspired further innovation to deliver a targeted offer for those most in need.

5.14   Merton Libraries initiated a laptop lending scheme along with mobile broadband devices (dongles) for those who do not have access to data. The devices are loaned for up to three months and one to one support is available from library volunteers to build confidence and knowledge in using the device.

5.15   In July 2020 Newham established Digital Inclusion Hubs in their libraries. They developed this model because the libraries "represented an existing infrastructure of public buildings embedded in local communities across the borough, because residents tend to stay relatively local to where they live to access this kind of support, and because libraries were well placed to take on the role as they were already a place where a lot of digital inclusion work has happened before." (LOTI report 2022).

What people have told us

5.16   In the table below, we have summarised what people have told us about Information and digital, based on our desktop review of the previous consultations, our interviews and external briefings.

5.17   Our full analysis and more detailed findings are in Appendix E.

Table 5.1: Information and digital – what people have told us

- Responses to the March 2021 consultation highlighted that residents recognised the role of the library service in helping people in most need to 'bridge the digital divide'. One of the most important library services offered to respondents was 'Using computers' and that one of the main things that would make libraries more relevant was 'more digital resources'.

- In response to feedback on the July 2021 consultation, it was indicated that the Council would 'incorporate' the 'recurring theme' of digital support sessions into the library service's 'new operating model to improve services'.

- We note the supporting information accompanying the previous consultations, where the Equalities Impact Assessment recognises that adults without digital access would be disproportionately affected by any reductions in library service provision.

- Our engagement has highlighted that people are experiencing data poverty challenges locally and need access to library buildings in order to access the free Wi-Fi. Anecdotal examples were shared with us of people sat outside locked library front doors trying to access the free Wi-Fi still available from within the building during closed hours.

- People have told us there is a growing need for more translation and ESOL support, especially to support refugees and asylum seekers, including the provision of information and advice in different languages.

- Attendees at the external briefings recognised that Open+ may offer opportunities to extend opening hours further, but told us that this should not be at the expense of professional library staff. Both residents and library staff will require technical support and training to make any extended use work smoothly and with reassurance.

- Officers recognise that any retained library buildings network will require targeted investment in its internal infrastructure, including IT hardware and software.

Summary of findings

Key findings

5.18   In the table below, we have summarised our key findings from this section:

Table 5.2: Information and digital - our key findings

- There are digital exclusion risk spots highlighted in the east and south of the borough but more comprehensive local data is needed to understand the reality of the need and priorities for support.

- Partnership working models have been effective in developing the library service offer as evidenced through provision of digital skills training for staff and residents through working with CCW

- The digital offer needs to keep evolving to match the changing digital and technological landscape.

Recommendations

5.19   In the table below, we have summarised our recommendations for Phase 2:

Table 5.3: Information and digital - recommendations

- Undertake more detailed research and analysis on digital exclusion to better understand the need.

- Explore device lending programmes to better address digital exclusion and reach more widely. This might involve training and recruiting more volunteers to support.

- Explore embedding the digital inclusion principles in the programme for the new digital discovery zone – allowing for the different needs between people of different ages and demographics in the borough.

6. Culture and creativity: what our analysis tells us

Context

6.1   The aim of the Culture and Creativity Universal Offer is: '**to enable local communities to access and participate in a variety of quality and diverse arts and cultural experiences through local libraries**'.

6.2   Libraries have increasingly become recognised as a gateway into the arts in local cultural landscapes. Libraries are often more local, accessible and welcoming spaces than traditional arts venues. As a result they do not carry the same barriers to access that can prevent people feeling at ease in galleries, theatres or other formal cultural venues. Many children and young people first encounter culture and creativity in a library setting and there is a huge opportunity for libraries to inspire and create confidence and a love for the arts and creativity throughout people's lives.

6.3   The development of culture and creativity in libraries has also been enabled by the move to place libraries development under Arts Council England's remit in 2012. This has more closely aligned library services with other arts and culture partners in regards to accessing funding and from 2018 library services have been included in the ACE National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) programme, reflecting their strategic significance in delivering cultural and creative opportunities and experiences and for supporting the development of arts and culture in the country. There are now 16 library services with NPO status with culture and creativity embedded in their work (including LB Merton).

6.4   The cost of living crisis has also limited the amount of recreational and leisure spending many households are able to make, creating further barriers to accessing cultural experiences. A strong, affordable cultural offer delivered through libraries can ensure that everyone is able to benefit from arts and culture and to help reduce inequality in this area.

Need in the Borough

6.5   Creative opportunities for young people is a key priority within Croydon's cultural strategy and for the Council as a whole. This has also been embedded in new statutory guidance from DCMS (Sept 2023) on provision of services to support the wellbeing of young people which states that local authorities must provide or enable: "A sufficient quantity of educational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being and sufficient facilities for such activities and a sufficient quantity of recreational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being, and sufficient facilities for such activities"

6.6   In 2019 Croydon Council was successful in bidding for the London Borough of Culture award to deliver a year long programme of activity intended to bring a lasting legacy of creative opportunity and sector development for people in Croydon. This Is Croydon is being delivered between April 2023 and March 2024 with over 70 events and projects taking place across the borough and over 40 commissioned partners.

6.7   Learning from cultural programme delivery and development in 2023 includes:

- There is a disparity of cultural infrastructure in the borough with most venues and activity situated in Central Croydon and South Norwood.

- Audience behaviours have changed significantly following the Covid-19 pandemic and it is more challenging and resource intensive for the sector to market events and reach new audiences.

- There is a lack of financial resilience in the sector, particularly for the smaller organisations who need to invest significant staff time and resource on fundraising and development.

- There is a development need amongst the grass roots and smaller organisations for fundraising, marketing and evaluation support and clarity and knowledge of practical processes to put on events and activate spaces.

- It has been more challenging to attract and retain volunteers and this has had an adverse impact on capacity in the smaller organisations to continue delivering work and to remain sustainable.

How we are currently addressing these needs

6.8   Croydon Libraries deliver the culture offer primarily through talks and performance events on an ad hoc basis. Financial restrictions on spending have limited the ability of the service to programme or seek grant funding for cultural projects without matched resource. The library buildings are also ill equipped to host a cultural programme with limited events or exhibition space.

6.9   In addition to the 13 libraries, the Council's cultural offer also includes the Museum of Croydon and Croydon Archives which all sit within the Croydon Clocktower building. These services deliver exhibitions and events programmes directly delivered and through partnership with other groups. They also deliver skills workshops for cultural and community partners and an outreach offer with handling collections, reminiscence and learning activities. However budget reductions in recent years have also limited the opening times and operation of the museum services.

6.10   The David Lean cinema is also situated in the Clocktower building, delivering an extensive programme of art house and independent film screenings, relaxed showings and talks.

6.11   This Is Croydon, the Croydon London Borough of Culture programme is testing new ways of delivering creative programmes in the borough and generating insight into audiences, spaces and methods of engaging residents with culture and creativity.

6.12   Within the libraries this has included creating a gallery space at Thornton Heath Library to host Constable's The Cornfield as part of the National Gallery touring programme and delivering an evening of discussion with LGBTQ+ writers at Purley Library in partnership with Bold Mellon, as a companion event to their Queer Joy exhibition.

What others have done

6.13   Libraries Unlimited which operates 54 libraries across Devon and Torbay are an Arts Council NPO, now receiving £700k funding. Projects delivered under this programme have included the A to Z of creative wellbeing, an online portal showcasing every day creative acts, writers in residence programmes and touring film festivals.

6.14   There have also been a number of library refurbishments in recent years which have successfully embedded the cultural and creative offer in the library design. These include the Storyhouse in Chester which opened in 2017 and incorporates the library with a theatre, independent cinema, community cultural space and a restaurant and the Library at Willesden Green which opened in 2015 with an integrated professional art gallery, performance space, museum and archives, heritage exhibition space, classroom and a flexible design to allow for a range of dance, performance, promenade and aerial arts to take place in the main library areas.

What people have told us

6.15   In the table below, we have summarised what people have told us about culture and creativity, based on our desktop review of the previous consultations, our interviews and external briefings.

6.16   Our full analysis and more detailed findings are in Appendix E.

Table 6.1: Culture and creativity – what people have told us

- Responses to the March 2021 consultation told the Council that one of the most important library services offered to respondents were 'Rhymetimes / children's activities'. Respondents also told the Council that one of the most important things missing from the current service offer and would help make libraries more relevant were more 'Activities ('Improved and additional activities for all')' and that the promotion of activities could be improved.

- In response to feedback on the July 2021 consultation, it was indicated that the Council would 'incorporate' the 'recurring theme' of better publicity about activities into the library service's 'new operating model to improve services'.

- There is understood to be a growing need for access to free (or highly affordable) spaces for various community groups, and people, to 'do their own thing'.

- Officers recognise that any retained library buildings network will require targeted investment in its internal infrastructure, including the activity spaces and physical fabric to enable greater access and use of buildings (e.g. for security access and/or keyholder permissions to get into rooms).

- We were told that any new service offer should not take a 'one size fits all' approach across Croydon and must have locally tailored elements. This could include offering a revised programme of enriching cultural activities and events that reflect the local communities living in proximity to each library branch.

Summary of findings

Key findings

6.17   In the table below, we have summarised our key findings from this section:

Table 6.2: Culture and creativity - our key findings

• There is a geographic disparity in cultural infrastructure with the south and east of the borough particularly underserved. • Libraries can play a supporting role within the cultural ecosystem by partnering with grassroots and smaller cultural organisations to build their skills and ability to reach audiences. • There is an established audience for events in libraries but the current condition and design of the library buildings limits the possibilities.

Recommendations

6.18   In the table below, we have summarised our recommendations for Phase 2:

Table 6.3: Culture and creativity - recommendations

• Detailed audience research and engagement work undertaken across the borough to better understand demand and need. • Capital libraries investment undertaken to increase facilities and capacity for events and cultural programmes to be delivered. • Libraries should actively engage with the cultural network and legacy groups emerging from This Is Croydon to build relationships and opportunities to develop the culture offer.

7. Employment and learning: what our analysis tells us

Context

7.1   Employment and Learning services are not recognised by Libraries Connected as a distinct Universal Offer theme, though aspects of it sit elsewhere, particularly Information and Digital. That said, the provision of learning opportunities was central to the founding intent behind public libraries, and the role of libraries continues to be highly valued, particularly for lifelong learning.

7.2   Whilst formal employment and learning programmes sit with specialist providers, libraries have a contribution to make within a wider offer. Many library services deliver focussed employment support such as job clubs, CV writing workshops and mentoring and through partnerships with job centres and other employability services.

7.3   The focus on this section is on employment and skills related to employability rather than general skills and learning covered elsewhere in this report.

Need in the Borough

7.4   The proportion of out of work claimants is falling in Croydon but is still higher than the regional and national averages. The job density figure for Croydon is 0.58 (2021). The desired rate would be 1.00. The Croydon rate is still much lower than London (1.02) and Great Britain (0.85)

7.5   Latest figures (2021-22) show that three quarters (77.3%) of Croydon residents aged 16-64 years are in employment. This is a slightly lower proportion than in London and nationally.

7.6   Croydon has an average score of 0.136 for the income domain, which places it as the 97th most deprived local authority out of the 317 lower tier authority districts in England or 73rd out of 151 upper tier authorities. Croydon is ranked 18th most deprived out of 33 London boroughs; 41 LSOAs out of the 220 LSOAs in the borough (18.6%) are in the top 20% most deprived LSOAs in the country. These deprived areas are mainly in the north and east of the borough. One neighbourhood area in the ward of West Thornton is in the top 5% most deprived areas in the country.

7.7   The average score for the Employment domain was 0.092, placing Croydon as the 143rd most deprived LSOA out of the 317 lower tier districts or 87th out of 151 upper tier districts. Croydon is 15th most deprived out of 33 London boroughs.

7.8   Overall educational attainment in the borough is below London averages and many young people travel outside of the borough to access higher and further education.

7.9   The Council is undertaking economic analysis research to gain a current insight into the opportunities and challenges in the sector which continues to be in recovery from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

7.10   Croydon has historically been known for having a strong retail sector though this has declined post Covid. As the employment created through retail is often lower paid with fewer opportunities for progression and a lack of diversity in senior management, there is an opportunity to develop other sectors in the local economy to generate better quality roles in the borough as part of the pandemic recovery.

7.11   This includes positioning Croydon as an employment and business hub between London to the north and to the counties to the South, including the economic growth around Gatwick Airport.

7.12   Croydon's universal credit and unemployment rates are amongst the highest across south London and there is perceived to be a negative cycle of few opportunities in the borough leading more people to look elsewhere in the city and the South.

7.13   Rates of unemployment are higher in the north and east of Croydon than the south with particular densities around Thornton Heath, New Addington and Old Coulsdon.

7.14   Workspace providers in the borough are reporting 80-90% occupancy but companies are using facilities in different ways and looking more at meeting space and agile work/home learning hybrids.

7.15   Development trends in Croydon are generating more transient populations with a high volume of build to rent housing targeting young professionals. The appeal of relatively affordable housing compared to other areas of London and good transport links into central London are part of this attraction.

7.16   Croydon's cultural vibrancy and creative activity and enterprise is also a strategic attraction for the creative industries and young professionals more generally and this is a priority area for the Council to develop further.

How we are currently addressing these needs

7.17   Research commissioned by Arts Council England in 2022 describes how England's public library services deliver a unique employment support offer through three strands: Human help, Digital and learning resources and a Desk-work environment. The report found that 100% of libraries deliver to these options in some way with 65% offering CV and application support and job clubs and 46% offering job clubs.

7.18   Croydon libraries delivers human help through staff support for people to get online, search for jobs and develop basic digital skills and a volunteering scheme which enables people to gain experience in the workplace.

7.19   Digital and learning resources are available through free to use public PCs, Wi-Fi, digital skills programmes and access to online training resources through the digital library.

7.20   A desk-work environment is provided through dedicated spaces for quiet computer use and the provision of computers in children's libraries to provide a safe space and activity for children while their parents and carers look for work online.

7.21   Croydon libraries also previously delivered the British Library programme supporting start-ups in London Libraries (SILL). A project officer provided mentoring and IP support, and workshops were delivered in the library for people looking to set up their own businesses. The Council currently has grant funding to restart this programme based at the Central Library.

7.22   Job Centre Plus are looking to establish a youth hub in the borough to support young people to develop job skills and find employment through job clubs and employment support officers.

7.23   Croydon Works is a free job brokerage service which targets those furthest away from employment. The service is successful in placing over 200 people with London Living Wage employment every year with a current focus on health, care and construction roles.

7.24   The Council's adult learning provider CALAT are collocated with the libraries in the central Croydon Clocktower campus and New Addington. The service provides a broad adult learning offer with particular impact in ESOL, community and family learning programmes. The service is currently in transition and looking at focussing on entry level 1 and 2 key skills provision and reviewing the reach across the borough outside the two core learning hubs in central Croydon and Thornton Heath.

7.25   The Council's economic development programmes include Start up, Scale up which is supporting SMEs in brough to focus on innovation and growth and the new Creative Digital Lab opened in 2023 with Start Up Croydon to support creative enterprises in the borough.

7.26   Covid recovery is focussed primarily on supporting businesses in Croydon town centre where the previously strong retail offer has been adversely impacted by changes in behaviour following the pandemic. This work will help inform a new strategy for Croydon town centre improving and diversifying the offer for residents to increase footfall and investment.

7.27   The Shared Prosperity grant funding programme is also delivering local business support and regeneration across the borough with a particular focus on Selsdon, Purley, Thornton Heath and West Croydon.

What others have done

7.28   Between 2016 and 2023 Leicestershire Libraries were involved in delivering the GREAT project funded by National Lottery and EU funds to support families into employment, education and training through a partnership of eleven local and national specialist organisations. The programme reached 901 participants who were disadvantaged and/or long term unemployed and who received support from an employment support officer and access to job clubs and employment support programmes in the local libraries.

7.29   The partnership approach created a holistic support offer for participants through specialist employment and skills support and an enabling, accessible environment in the libraries.

7.30   Tower Hamlets council remodelled their library service to foreground education and integrate classrooms and learning provision with library services, relaunching the libraries as Idea Stores in 2002. This programme invested in the library buildings and relocated some libraries to areas of higher footfall with sites remodelled to integrate education, employment and cultural programmes alongside a traditional library offer.

What people have told us

7.31   In the table below, we have summarised what people have told us about Employment and learning, based on our desktop review of the previous consultations, our interviews and external briefings.

7.32   Our full analysis and more detailed findings are in Appendix E.

Table 7.1: Employment and learning – what people have told us

- Feedback to the March 2021 consultation told the Council that one of the most important library services offered to respondents was 'Space to work or research'.

- There is understood to be a growing need for safe out of hours study space for students. There are also growing concerns locally at the post-Covid legacy and its unknown longer-term impact in years to come on the borough's current generation of under 18 year olds.

- There are also a number of opportunities to be explored for the library service's co-location, partnering or integrating the library service with other services and voluntary sector organisations, including (but not limited to) CALAT.

Summary of findings

Key findings

7.33   In the table below, we have summarised our key findings from this section:

Table 7.2: Employment and learning - our key findings

- There is a need for more targeted support for young people to develop skills and access employment.

- There are particular areas of need within the borough to target support and resource towards addressing unemployment.

- Some funding is available through grants and development schemes to support employment and economic development and there is an opportunity for the library service to play a more active role in these projects.

Recommendations

7.34   In the table below, we have summarised our recommendations for Phase 2:

Table 7.3: Employment and learning - recommendations

- To explore a joined up approach with CALAT to provide employment support, advice and training

- To link with the Job Centre Plus youth employment support hub to develop the library support offer for young people in parallel with other services and develop referral pathways

- To make links with town and district centre regeneration programmes to explore opportunities to embed library services within new developments and programmes

- To explore other successful models of integrating libraries, learning and employment services such as the Idea Stores

8. Engagement findings so far

Introduction

8.1 In Chapters 3 to 7 we reported highlights of the engagement findings most relevant to the Universal Library Offers. In Chapter 8 we expand on what people have told us about Croydon's library service through our desktop review of the findings from the previous public consultation exercises held by the Council in 2021, the interviews and the external briefings.

8.2 We have summarised our findings in the tables below. Our full analysis and more detailed findings are included in Appendix E.

2021 consultations summary

Key findings

8.3 In the tables below, we have summarised the key findings from our desktop review of the existing analyses of the two consultation exercises in March and July.

Table 8.1: Public consultation March 2021 (Phase 1)

- The four most important library services to respondents were: 'browsing and borrowing books; 'Rhymetimes/children's activities'; 'Space to work or research' and 'Using computers'.

- The three most important things that respondents felt were missing were: Resources (books, newspapers); Activities ('Improved and additional activities for all'), and Opening Hours ('Lack of evening & weekend opening hours').

- Many respondents pointed to the importance of the library service helping to reach the digitally excluded.

- Additional suggestions from respondents included: more books; refreshments; longer opening hours; improved promotion of activities; and contactless/card payment.

- Respondents said the following would make libraries more relevant: 'more comfortable modern spaces', 'better resources including books', 'more digital resources', 'a café', 'better local promotion and more activities'.

- The quantity of responses (2,510), indicated the strength of local respondent feeling.

Table 8.2: Public consultation July 2021 (Phase 2)

- There was a significant drop-off in response rate from the March consultation (1,411 responses), indicating possible consultation fatigue and cynicism about the process.

- Of those responding to the options, 56% agreed, or strongly agreed with the option to reduce library hours by 21%; 37% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

- 70% disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the option to outsource the management of all 13 libraries

- 58% disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the option for five community run libraries and reduced opening hours for eight libraries.

- The Council committed to 'incorporate' the 'recurring themes' of better publicity about opening hours and activities; digital support sessions and more volunteering to support libraries into the library service's 'new operating model to improve services'.

- Respondents were concerned about: the comprehensibility of the options presented for consultation and the supporting information; Covid lockdown closures being permanent; lack of recognition by the Council of the role of libraries as a 'lifeline' that were 'important for wellbeing' locally.

- The Equalities Impact Assessment identifies that specific user groups (especially families with young children; adults without digital access; unemployed people; seniors, and school children) were likely to be disproportionately affected by any reductions to Croydon's library service offer.

Autumn 2023 external briefings – summary of responses

8.4   Short briefings were arranged for library friends' groups and other organisations who had been actively involved in the consultations in 2021. On the whole, people expressed **unhappiness** and **frustration** at the impact of moving to part-time opening, seen by some as '**disastrous**'. There was a clear understanding that the impact of the changes was **far worse than the nominal 21%** reduction in hours proposed, given how poorly Open+ and extending volunteering were perceived to have worked so far.

8.5   The importance of reviewing the opening hours was highlighted with various **examples of parents, young children and people with traditional 9-5 working hours being unable to access libraries**. Several people told us how the lack of '**opening on a Saturday'** was **an issue**, as well as a lack of **evenings** and **after school**. We even heard reports of **people sitting outside libraries on closed days trying to access free Wi-Fi**.

8.6   There was a majority feeling amongst the groups that there had been a 'one size fits all' approach adopted for the whole service, which didn't work in Croydon. One person told us there was a need for local '**bespokeness'** in the library offer.

8.7   We also heard how perceived **miscommunication** and **poor signage** had confused some residents. There were several anecdotes shared with us of **people didn't understand 'the hours the library was open'**, thought their local library had completely closed and simply 'don't understand' why their library was now open part-time. One person stated that the usage figures showing a recent decline in library usage 'doesn't surprise me'.

8.8   Some people felt the cuts to the service, understood to have driven the requirement for such significant changes, were '**short-sighted'**. One person asked whether 'the savings have now been achieved once and for all?'. Another individual expressed their frustration at having observed local politicians 'celebrating at local events' without acknowledging the cuts to the library service, and at the likelihood of further library building closures being stated unofficially to members of the public.

8.9   A number of people described how residents 'are **struggling'** and '**need more help'**. A handful of people **rued the loss of 'community and family space'**, and that **access to Wi-Fi and computers** had been taken away from '**those who need it most'** – one person felt that access had been especially reduced for '**deprived'** areas in Croydon.

8.10   People described to us how they perceived **the library workforce to be 'spread'** across the borough. Several individuals **queried the financial logic** of 'getting rid of staff, then putting in a machine, then paying a security guard', telling us that 'there should be a librarian, not a security guard' in place. A number of people perceived there were library service **volunteer recruitment and retention challenges** in Croydon.

8.11   There were some **individual views** (a minority) where **the change had had a positive impact**. A handful of people told us they felt their local library was 'thriving' or similar, and that 'things were picking up' after taking a little while for residents to 'become familiar with the new hours'. One person told us they felt 'the online system for loans' was 'working quite well'.

Staff 'idea generation' workshops

Our approach

Croydon library service staff were invited to participate in three 'idea generation' workshops. The workshops were intended to offer staff an opportunity to take stock of the impact of previous changes to the library service and to contribute their ideas to help shape the future service.

What good looks like

8.12   Staff told us that Croydon's libraries need to be accessible, providing free services in comfortable, warm and safe environments that have a welcoming atmosphere and 'buzz'. The library buildings should feel modern and be well embedded within their communities. Internally, they must be 'well organised', with plenty of spaces set out for different activities and user groups. The libraries need to be 'well resourced', with 'knowledgeable' and 'friendly' staff on hand to provide clear advice and support to people about what is on offer – reading, especially, should be celebrated, and the IT infrastructure throughout must be 'reliable'.

Gap analysis: how far is our service from 'good'?

8.13   Staff shared their thoughts on how far they felt the current service was from 'good', using a 'balanced scorecard' approach focused on four core perspectives – *customer, processes, staffing, finances* – plus '*anything else'* that felt was key.

8.14 *Customer*: staff told us there is a need for more book stock. We heard how opening hours and staffing levels needed overhauling in order to help meet shifting customer expectations, including people experiencing homelessness, IT support and more study space. The internal fabric of buildings and IT infrastructure require investment. There are also pockets of challenging customer behaviour to be managed.

8.15 *Processes*: staff told us of various IT infrastructure and reliability issues, including IT support, photocopier issues and frustrations at a lack of card payment options. Customers expect support with other public services that staff are not trained for. Inflexible policies are frustrating staff, particularly opening hours, recruitment and Internet usage.

8.16 *Staffing*: staff told us that opening hours, staffing levels and a perceived 'reliance on their good will' were of particular concern and required addressing urgently. Staff are loaded with 'additional responsibilities' and are frustrated at not being able to provide continuity at some sites. Staff perceive they are doing well in spite of the challenges they face but understand they could do more if there were more resources available.

8.17 *Finances*: staff are extremely frustrated at the lack of funding available for them to do a good job, including available stock, events and activities, physical fabric and materials.

8.18 *Anything else*: staff particularly referred to the 'state' of the physical fabric in libraries and the various accessibility issues, including the need for improvements to the comfort of buildings. The combination of all these challenges was affecting the morale of a number of staff.

Suggestions and ideas for change

8.19 Staff were invited to offer their suggestions and ideas for change for the future library service offer.

Table 8.3: Staff workshops – ideas for change

Ideas for change
• Appearance and physical fabric of libraries: including improved accessibility, comfort, and physical fabric repairs.   • Career development: more opportunities for staff redeployment and secondment.   • Events – revised offer: including social media use and marketing approach.   • Funding – new approaches: fundraising and ideas for income generation.   • IT: improved infrastructure reliability; up to date payment systems.   • Location of libraries: accessibility improvements.   • Opening hours: to be overhauled; reducing branches to expand staffed hours.   • Outreach: explore the potential to reach more respondents.   • Safety and security: improve accessibility; equipment and security reliability.

Ideas for change
• Staffing: improve job security, development, training and progression; support staff morale; communication improvements; working patterns and staffing levels. • Stock: more copies of popular stock; staff input into stock choices. • Van deliveries: quicker and more frequent deliveries to library branches.

The need for more detailed consultation

8.20 **The views summarised above are expanded upon in Appendix E.**

8.21 This is just the start of the engagement process. Extensive detailed conversations will be needed with the public, library friends groups and other interested organisations and staff will continue to be engaged.

8.22 We particularly also want to reach residents who are not currently library users to understand their priorities, needs and barriers to access.

8.23 Plans for consultation are set out at the end of this report.

9. What we've found out about our library service and what's gone wrong

What's driving change

9.1 The Council always intended to undertake a review of the library service model to assess how well it was working following the decision to reduce opening hours. In the time since, the service has received feedback from residents that they are unhappy with the opening hours and service provision.

9.2 The library service have also found that the current model is not sustainable during periods of staff absence and library and archives service points have unfortunately had to close to the public at times due to insufficient staffing.

9.3 The nature of the Council's financial position also means that it is not able to maintain so many buildings which aren't well used. The ongoing pressure on Council budgets necessitates that it gets the maximum usage out of the buildings which are retained to provide services for the public.

9.4 The current library service model does not make best use of the 13 library buildings with most only open to the public two to three days a week. Whilst usage of the libraries is increasing, it is still low when compared with other library services and as a proportion of the population.

9.5 The planned mitigations for reducing opening hours have had a disappointing impact. Open+ self-service access was introduced to two library sites in May and October 2023 and whilst it is still a relatively new service model for Croydon, over the first five months only 4% of visits to Selsdon Library have been during self service access days. However usage figures are now gradually rising at both sites.

9.6 Increased partnership working and use of volunteers were also planned mitigations for a reduction in library opening hours. However the service has struggled to recruit and retain volunteers particularly to cover key roles and shifts including lunchtime support in the smaller library branches. Partnerships have helped to bring activity to the libraries but the service has not been able to develop a model which would increase opening hours.

9.7 The current service model also does not create any capacity for outreach or marketing and engagement to let residents know about the library offer and opening times. Some residents are unclear when the libraries are open, what's available and are less likely to visit and use services as a result.

9.8 Our library usage data indicates that there is a loyal cohort of library users who are committed to borrowing items from the library and have adapted their visiting patterns to attend on open days. However the service cannot be sustained without reaching more people and would be failing in its duty to enable as many residents as possible, and particularly those with the greatest need, to benefit from the library service offer.

What needs are we meeting?

9.9 The current model does provide a geographic spread of local library buildings with a basic core service available to people around the borough at least two days a week providing books, computers, Wi-Fi, information services and events.

9.10 All libraries are also able to deliver at least one weekly activity for children aged under 5 and their carers, which is a popular aspect of the service.

9.11 Multiple reading groups are also offered at different locations, days and times supporting delivery of reading development and engagement with a broad range of texts.

What needs aren't we meeting?

9.12 There are groups for whom the current opening hours prevent their accessing services when and where they need them, particularly working people and working families and students who need space to work, especially during exam periods. For these groups the limited Saturday and lack of evening openings is a barrier.

9.13 The opening hours also currently limit access for children to visit after school on closed days when the library could be a safe place to stop and study before going home or for younger children to come with carers for shared reading time.

9.14 There are also residents in pockets of the borough who are underrepresented in our usage figures including communities in estates such as Shrublands and Tollers where there are no library services in the immediate vicinity and the service does not have the resource to deliver an outreach offer.

9.15 The current library buildings limit the capacity of the service to deliver a comprehensive universal offer programme through fixed layouts, a lack of accessible facilities, no exhibition space and few event spaces or rooms for hire to collocate services together. We are therefore unable to deliver on the full potential of the library services to meet local needs for health information, health improvement activity, digital support and creative activity.

9.16 The libraries are also generally not well located for the local population they serve which also presents a barrier to access and meeting need within the locality.

9.17 It is challenging to reach people and raise awareness of the library service offer without any dedicated marketing and engagement resource.

9.18 The current model, including the staff capacity, fixed library locations and design is orientated towards a more traditional library service. This does not create capacity for the service offer to adapt to population changes in the borough, shifting demand or need.

How efficient and effective the service is

9.19   The comparative data for library services in England has been disrupted in recent years by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and a reduction in the number of authorities reporting. The most recent available datasets provided by CIPFA take data from 2021-2022 and are therefore flawed as a benchmark. The next datasets for 2022 to 2023 will provide a much more accurate picture and are expected to be published in early 2024.

9.20   Croydon's ranking position on standard performance measures in these years is very poor, reflecting the similarly low level of spending in comparison with other London Boroughs. The Council's performance was in the bottom decile (in 28th place out of 30) for loans both in 2019/20 (before the pandemic) and in 2021/22 as services emerged from the pandemic. The number of visits were nearly as low compared with others.

Table 9.1: CIPFA comparative ranking information – 2019-2022

	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
No of loans per 1000 population	28th out of 30	21st out of 25	17th out of 18
No of visits per 1000 population	24th out of 30	23rd out of 23	15th out of 16

Recent trends in Croydon's performance

9.21   Like most library services, the pandemic had a severe impact on library usage. The comparisons above suggest that the poor performance of Croydon's service in the past has remained poor after the pandemic.

9.22   Most of Croydon's performance figures show a slow and, in some instances, stalling recovery from the pandemic and it is likely that Croydon's recovery has been slower than others' due to the severity of the reduction in opening hours in Croydon in 2022.

9.23   There is one exception to this pattern. **The total number of loans of books and other materials has actually risen by 13% for the first six months of this year compared with the first six months in 2019/20** (ie in a period before the pandemic).

Figure 9.1: trends in issues of books and other materials

Issues Total - Physical & Digital
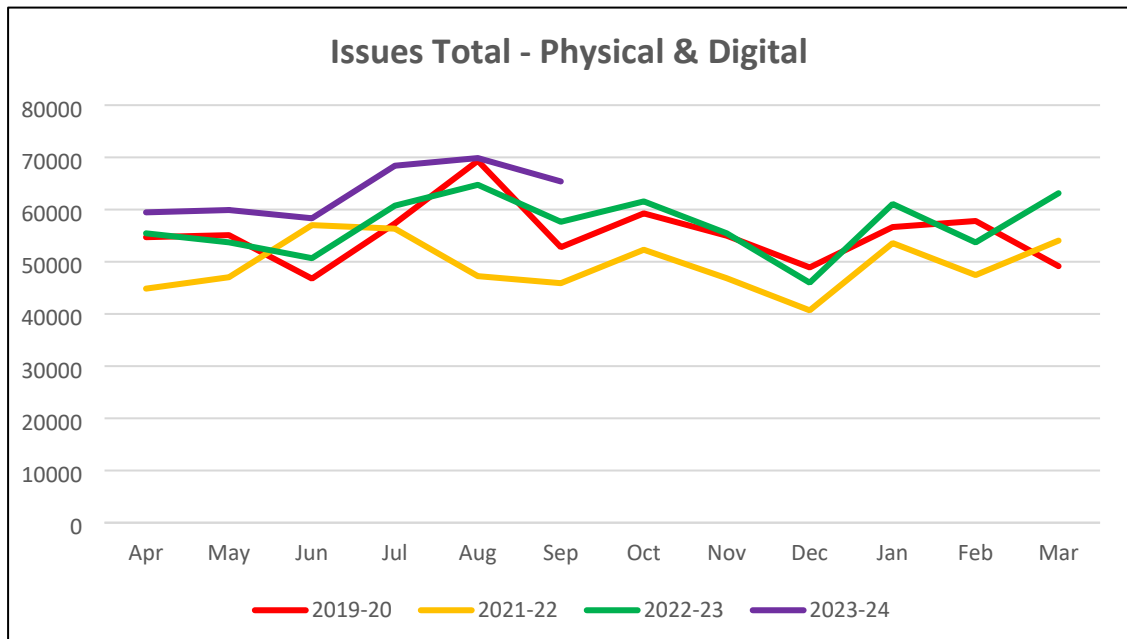
9.24   This is the result of two trends. First, the number of physical issues has recovered steadily since the pandemic and for the first six months of 2023/24 has reached 88% of the level for the same period in 2019/20.

Figure 9.2: trends in issues of physical books and materials

Issues - Physical
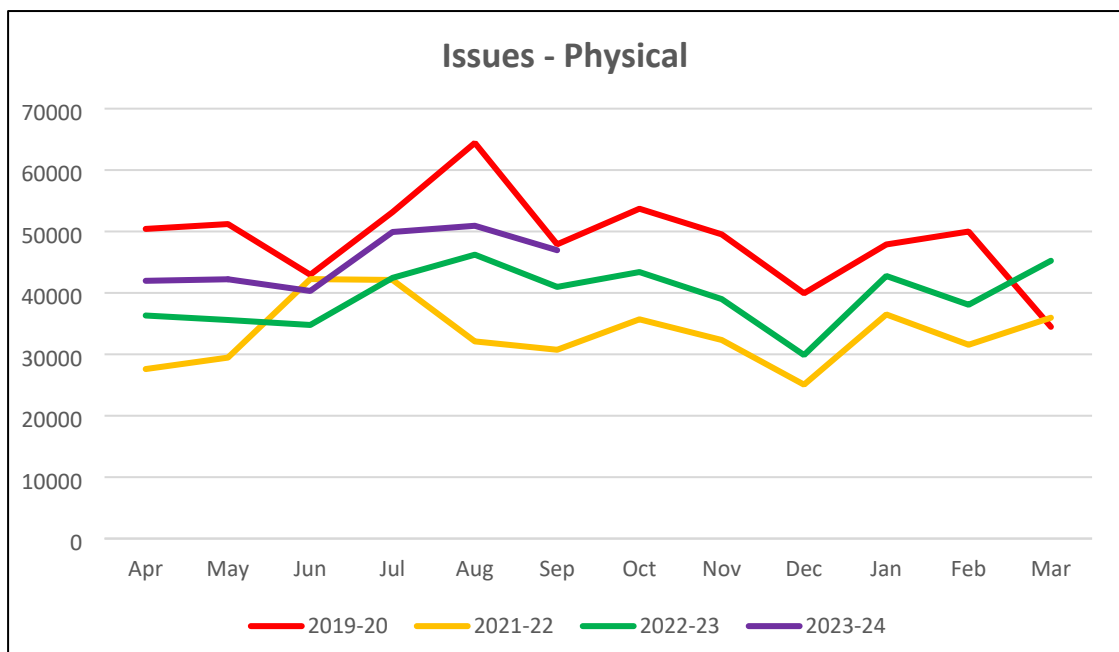
9.25   The trend driving the overall increase in issues is **a dramatic rise since the pandemic in the number of digital issues which now make up 29% of total issues[2].** Digital issues rose rapidly during the lockdowns and have steadily grown.

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[2] For the period of the first six months of 2023/24.

Figure 9.3: the trend in issues of digital books and materials
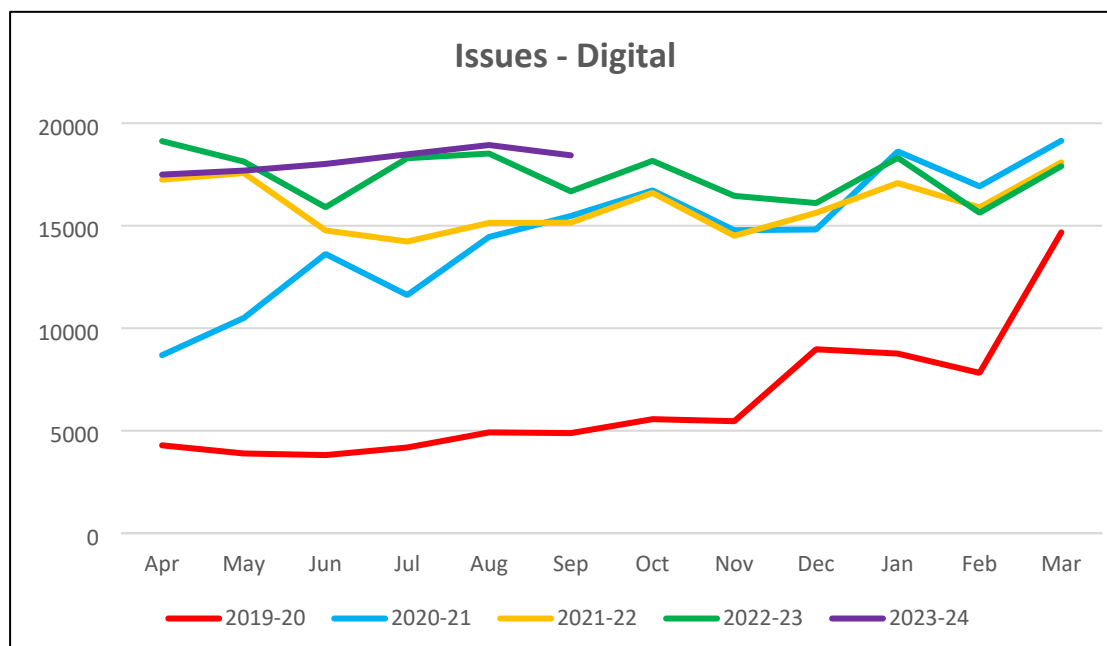
9.26   This is very encouraging and reflects the benefits brought by the library service joining The Libraries Consortium (TLC) in 2019. Through the apps provided by TLC, users can now borrow digital books and material from the entire stock of the other TLC member authorities.

9.27   The scale of the shift towards digital books and materials might suggest that the library building is becoming a less important part of library usage. However, it may be that the balance between physical and digital books in library usage is simply mirroring shifts in the retail market. After a surge in eBooks and audiobook sales over the last decade it appears that they may have settled (even if temporarily) at a level of just under a third. One market report suggests that digital books had a share of about 29% in 2022[3] (ie a similar level as the share of digital books and materials in Croydon's library service).

9.28   It is not yet clear what has driven this shift in borrowing patterns, eg:

- Have users who are determined to borrow physical books and other materials simply adjusted the timing of their visits to fit within the reduced opening hours?

- Have users who would have preferred physical items, but who can no longer fit in a visit, resorted to digital items instead?

- Have users of physical items chosen to switch to digital items as they prefer them *or* are digital users *new* users?

9.29   **Despite this encouraging increase in total issues since the pandemic, it is worth bearing in mind that Croydon's comparative performance in the number of issues per head of population has been very low.** The release of CIPFA's comparative data for 2022/23 will show whether there has been much, if any, change in Croydon's position in the league table.

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[3] Nielsen BookData: Books & Consumers Monthly Survey, April 2023

9.30   Reading remains a core part of the role of the library service, but the other Universal Offers described in earlier chapters illustrate the much wider role that libraries play, eg:

- Supporting health and wellbeing and reducing social isolation.

- Providing opportunities to enjoy cultural experiences.

- Giving people access to the digital world.

- Supporting learning and providing study space for young people.

- Providing help for job search and applications.

- Supporting community resilience and cohesion.

9.31   Two performance indicators can help to inform whether the library service is effective in supporting the full range of universal offers: how many people visit the library and how many are 'active users' (either as borrowers and/or users of IT).

9.32   First, **the footfall into the libraries has more than halved since the pandemic and remains stubbornly low**. Footfall for the first six months of 2023/24 is only 43% of the level for the same period in 2019/20.

Figure 9.4: the trend in footfall in libraries
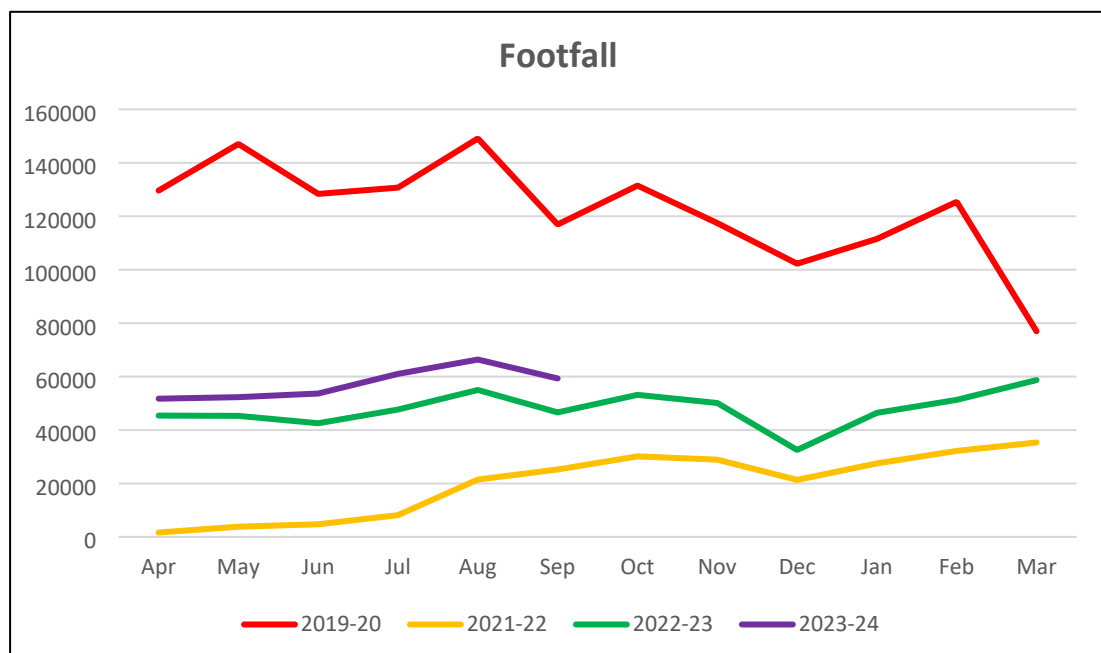
9.33   **Second, the number of 'active users' has nearly halved compared with pre-pandemic levels and for the month of June 2023 it remains only 58% of the level for the same month in 2019.**

Figure 9.5: the trend in active users of the library service
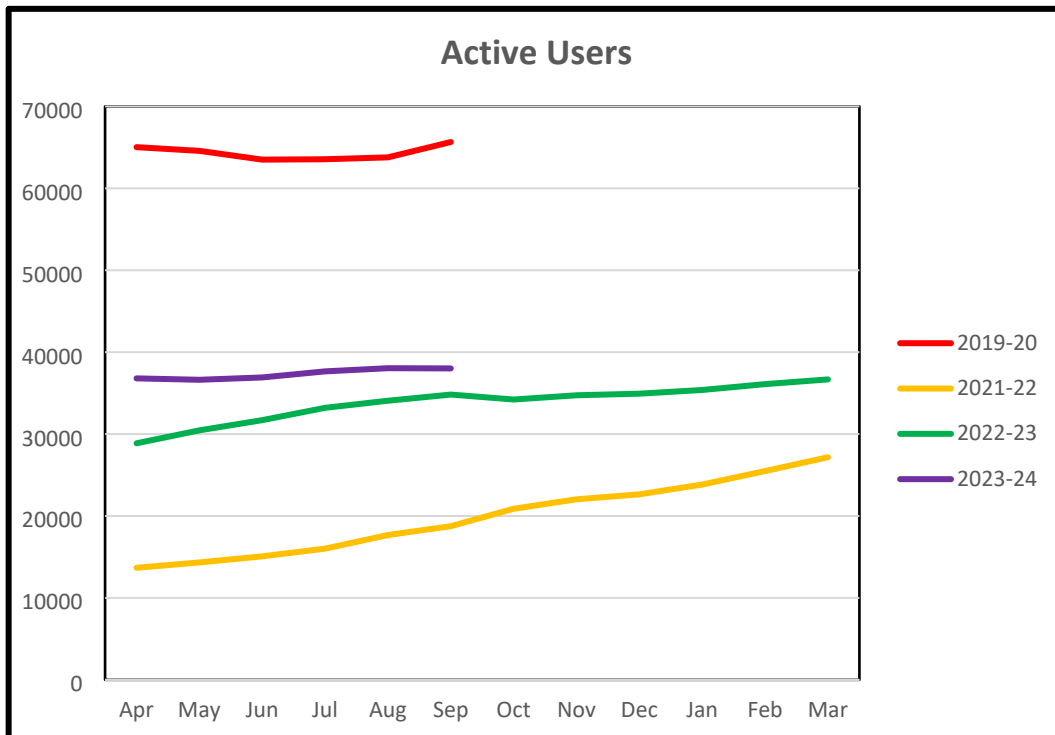
9.34   The definition of 'active user' is a library member who has used their library card *at least once* in the preceding 12 months to borrow, renew, or request items, or use a library computer, so it includes people who use a library several times a week and people who have used it just once in the past year.

9.35   **In September 2023 there were 38,016 active users, ie fewer than 10% of the population of the borough[4] used their library card for borrowing books and other materials or using a PC or printing and scanning at least once in the previous 12 months.** It should be noted that people can visit a library to browse, sit and read, use study space and Wi-Fi or attend an event without using their library card, but 'active user' remains an important indicator.

9.36   Other indicators are equally telling for the first six months of 2023/24 compared with 2019/20:

- The number of hours of PC use has more than halved at 37%. This has risen from 26% for the same period in 2022/23.

- The number of attendances at events has more than halved at 46%. This has risen from 27% for the same period in 2022/23.

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[4] Croydon's population was approximately 390,800 residents according to the ONS Census 2021. Source: 'Croydon Borough Profile June 2023', Croydon Council.

9.37   For both indicators this has been a positive trend, but it is probable they will begin to plateau as there are now only very limited hours in which people can access PCs and attend events. This is reflected in the feedback we have received which highlights the difficulty faced by users unable to access PCs and Wi-Fi for most of the week and the problems in scheduling more activities within just two or three days of opening.

A summary of what we have found

9.38   The pandemic disrupted the ability of the library service to provide a full offer of services to the public. In the period since, that service has been severely impacted by the decision to reduce opening hours to two or three days a week for 11 of the borough's 13 libraries.

9.39   **On one measure, the issue of all books and other materials, the service has increased slightly since before the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours, albeit against a low base of usage pre pandemic and when benchmarked against neighbours.** That increase has been driven by a greater take-up of digital books and materials to the point where they represent nearly a third of all issues. Digital issues do not depend on the opening hours of libraries.

9.40   **For all the library service's other functions which do rely on library opening hours, the combined effect of the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours has been devastating**. Visits have more than halved, active usage (including borrowing and using PCs) has nearly halved and PC usage and attendances at events have more than halved.

9.41   The indicators for PC usage and event attendance are improving for now, but this trend is likely to be 'capped' by the limited opening hours and stretched staff capacity. The other main indicators, including borrowing, visits and active usage are plateauing.

9.42   **What we do not yet know are the individual impacts of the pandemic and the reduction in opening hours**. Once the latest comparative performance data is published by CIPFA, we will be able to see the rate at which the performance of other authorities has recovered since the pandemic. This will then allow us to judge better the particular impact of the reduction in opening hours.

9.43   **In the meantime, the testimony of community groups, library staff and the feedback to staff from users has been clear: the reduction in staffed opening hours across the network has had a serious impact on the service and those who have relied on it.**

9.44   This will have had a serious adverse effect on many people's ability to take part in the digital world; on their health and wellbeing; on their participation in cultural life; and on their participation in the labour market. It will also have weakened people's sense of community.

9.45   **Even more seriously, the reduction in opening hours and stretched staff capacity hampers the ability of the library service to reach the people and communities who need it most and the future generation for whom a thriving library service is a passport to a better life.**

Things cannot continue as they are

9.46 **Through no fault of the skilled and committed library staff or of the users who are loyal and passionate about its value, the library service is now failing.**

9.47 The budget cut made in 2022 envisaged a reduction in opening hours of 21% thanks to the use of open+ self-service opening (ie without library staff) and other measures such as an increase in volunteers. As outlined earlier, neither measure has worked:

- The plan to extend open+ to five libraries has proved much more difficult than envisaged with only two complete. Where it has been implemented for longer (at Selsdon Library) take-up has been low. Even when implemented, unstaffed libraries cannot host events and activities, nor can they provide active support to people who need it or unaccompanied children aged under 16.

- The number of volunteers has also remained low and it is difficult to recruit and retain them, a difficulty faced by public and voluntary organisations across the country in recent years.

9.48 As a result, the reduction in opening hours has been far worse than envisaged: 48% excluding open+ opening hours and 39% if open+ opening hours are included (for the two libraries in which it has been implemented so far of the five planned).

9.49 **This review of the library service is designed to review the changes made in 2022 and to address these drivers for change**:

- The need to address the drivers for change, weaknesses and limitations of the current library service model summarised above.

- The ambition to deliver the highest quality and most impactful library service for Croydon residents with the resource available.

- The Council's strategic ambitions to establish Croydon as a place for learning and opportunity, where children and young people are able to flourish, residents live healthier and more independent lives and the Council is able to operate on a sustainable financial basis.

9.50 Based on the findings of this review and feedback so far, **responding to these drivers will require radical change and it is proposed that the success of the review will be judged by a draft set of simple strategic outcomes shown below.**

Table 9.2: draft strategic outcomes for the review of library services

By three years' time, we will be able to say that the library review has achieved the following:	
Primary outcome	**Supporting outcomes**
1. We are reaching more people.	• More people are using our library service. • We reach the people who need us most in Croydon. • People know what we're offering.
2. We have improved our service to the whole community.	• We have a wide range of popular services and activities. • People across our communities enjoy what's available. • Our facilities are welcoming and attractive.
3. Our service is more efficient.	• We are delivering better value within the resources we have. • We generate more income from events and venue hire. • More people are willing to help.

9.51   These draft strategic outcomes will be used to generate options for change and then to assess, evaluate and prioritise those options. Once adopted, the strategic outcomes should be kept under review to ensure they reflect the right ambitions for the future.

10. Options for the future and potential closures

Introduction

10.1   In this section we explore the potential options for delivering the strategic outcomes for the review.

10.2   We begin by summarising **the gap is between the current position and the strategic outcomes.**

10.3   **Then we review the ideas suggested by staff and community organisations and previously by the public** which are most likely to impact on the strategic outcomes. This longlist of options are analysed in full in Appendix B and summarised in this section.

10.4   **We then examine the impact of one of the options: revisiting the idea of closures**. Most of the options to improve the service depend to some degree on additional financial resources. Indeed, one of the options examined is increasing the library budget, but given the Council's financial position, we have concluded that this option is unrealistic.

10.5   On the other hand, **it has been assumed that some savings resulting from closures could be used to fund options for improving the service**. The option of closures has been examined in more detail in Appendix C and is summarised in this section.

10.6   **We conclude this section with a shortlist of options and a recommended package of changes as the basis for formal consultation with the public, community organisations, public bodies and staff.**

Gap analysis

10.7   In the previous sections of this report, we have examined how the library service is organised, how it delivers its role in promoting reading and literacy and its wider role in supporting health and wellbeing, digital access, culture and employment support. We have also explored what people have told us about what is needed and their ideas for the future. Finally, we examined the impacts of COVID and the move in 2022 to part-time opening on the performance of the service.

10.8   We have used that information to assess at a high level the scale of the challenge facing the Council – the gap that needs to be overcome.

Table 10.1: summary of gap analysis between current state and strategic outcomes

Primary and secondary outcomes	Key gaps (H,M,L[5]) in current state
1. We are reaching more people • More people are using our library service. • We reach the people who need us most in Croydon. • People know what we're offering.	• H: visits to library facilities has fallen far below what was already a comparatively very low base. • H: it is highly likely that the service is not reaching those most in need as there is no outreach work, but data is not available. • H: it is difficult to know what is available in libraries and social media followers are low. • H: most libraries are poorly located to benefit from footfall, eg that generated by shopping centres.
2. We have improved our service to the whole community • We have a wide range of popular services and activities. • People across our communities enjoy what's available. • Our facilities are welcoming and attractive.	• M: issues of books and other materials have improved slightly thanks to an increase in digital issues, but against a comparatively very low base. • M: digital issues are increasingly popular, but we don't yet know how this compares or how well-known this offer is. • L: joining TLC has given users access to the collections of over 20 library services. • H: cultural events and activities support health and well-being, but the number is restricted by opening hours, staff capacity and the buildings. • H: despite cost-of-living pressures, there has been a significant fall in free PC usage. • H/M: some libraries have been renovated to a high standard, but most are unattractive and are not easily adaptable for events.
3. Our service is more efficient • We are delivering better value within the resources we have. • We generate more income from events and venue hire. • More people are willing to help.	• H: the unit cost of services has risen since the reduction in opening hours. • H: most library buildings' environmental and energy performance is poor. • L: the new management of the service has already improved the IT systems thanks to joining TLC. • H: staff capacity is stretched and lacks resilience, leading to ad hoc closures. • H: apart from Central Library all others are part-time, wasting the building asset. • H: income-generation from more paid events or actively hiring out venues is limited by building design and opening hours. • H: the number of volunteers is low but there is support for some libraries (eg gardening).

10.9   **The size of the gaps identified above suggest that drastic change is required if the review is to achieve its ambitions.**

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[5] The gaps are summarised as H = high, M = medium, L = low.

Longlist of options for change

10.10   Given the scale of change required to close the gap and achieve the outcomes for the review, we have collated a range of ideas and suggestions that have emerged from engagement and consultation to date. This longlist of options is summarised below.

Table 10.2: longlist of options for change

Primary and secondary outcomes	Options considered
1. We are reaching more people • More people are using our library service. • We reach the people who need us most in Croydon. • People know what we're offering.	1. Reverse library budget cut to extend staffed opening hours in the existing network. 2. Extend evening/weekend opening. 3. Extend opening hours through Open Plus. 4. Move some libraries to better locations. 5. Close the poorer performing and less viable libraries in order to resource remaining libraries for longer hours. 6. Introduce 'library link' service points. 7. Introduce programme of outreach and marketing.
2. We have improved our service to the whole community • We have a wide range of popular services and activities. • People across our communities enjoy what's available. • Our facilities are welcoming and attractive.	1. Extend programme of improved events, working with partners. 2. Increase community language provision. 3. Improve signage, entrances and interiors. 4. Improve libraries' IT offer. 5. Promote the library service's digital offer. 6. Train staff for more interactive role.
3. Our service is more efficient • We are delivering better value within the resources we have. • We generate more income from events and venue hire. • More people are willing to help.	1. Co-locate libraries and other services and closer collaboration with CALAT. 2. Increase IT and checkout self-service 3. Explore alternative management arrangements. 4. Invest in increasing the number and scope of volunteers. 5. Introduce income generation. 6. Invest in energy efficiency

10.11   **In Appendix B, we have examined each of the longlisted options in turn. For each option in the appendix we:**

• **Summarise what's involved.**

• **Describe the potential benefits and negative impacts.**

• **Identify the resource implications.**

• **Identify further work required.**

• **Evaluate the option and its feasibility.**

• **Recommend whether the option should be pursued further.**

Summarising the options for delivering the outcomes

10.12   The data shows that visits and other uses of the library have fallen dramatically compared with pre-pandemic levels - and are unlikely to recover from the effects of the pandemic as quickly as in other similar library services. As a result, assuming that restoring the budget cuts is not a realistic prospect, it is proposed to revisit the option of closing some libraries and using the money released to reinvest in longer opening hours in the remaining libraries, creating a new local 'library link' service point in communities and undertaking marketing and outreach. Most libraries are not in the best location to maximise footfall and visits by the public and so this needs to be addressed as opportunities allow.

10.13   As described in chapter 3 of the review report, reading is still central to libraries' purpose, but they play a much wider role in improving the health and wellbeing and giving people access to the digital world. In recent years and particularly since the reduction in opening hours in 2022 the trends suggest significant falls in PC use which means that the digitally excluded might be missing out. There is less time available in each library to run events and activities and this has been flagged as a frustration for users.

10.14   The level of visits to libraries has plummeted across the network, probably as a result of the reduction in opening hours. Where other library services' usage numbers are available, they appear to have been recovering from COVID faster than Croydon's.

10.15   If resources can be released from library closures it will be possible to tackle these challenges through programmed events, increased community language provision, better signage and library interiors and a better IT and digital offer, Staff can also be freed up to play a more supportive role to library users.

10.16   As part of the changes agreed in 2022, the Council was planning to co-locate more services in libraries and extend volunteering. Neither has proved viable so far as outlined in this report. In 2022, the options of outsourcing and community management were explored as ways of saving money. Following feedback during consultation, neither option was pursued.

10.17   Given the potential for closures, the option of transferring some libraries to community management have been revisited as part of a plan to enlist more voluntary support. The potential for outsourcing or spinning out the service into a charitable body have also been re-considered but are not recommended. Options for further co-location, volunteering and income generation are explored.

Recommended options

Most of the options for improvement are recommended to be pursued in the next phase of work. However, these options for improving the library network are dependent on the reallocation of savings from library closures. The detailed analysis of the options for library closure (option 1.5) is contained in Appendix C.

Table 10.3: options recommended to be pursued in the next phase

Option	Recommendation
1.2	To explore further the option of evening and Saturday opening if resources can be freed up within the service.
1.3	To undertake a review of the performance of Open+ at Selsdon and Norbury Libraries and lessons learned in advance of further extension.
1.4	To develop a long-term plan for improving library locations to be implemented as opportunities arise in consultation with local communities.
1.5	To consult formally on the option of closing the poorer performing and less viable library buildings in order to resource remaining libraries for longer hours and improve the overall service.
1.6	To explore and test the option of a 'library link' service further.
1.7	To explore the resourcing of marketing and outreach if the service in libraries can be improved by other options.
2.1	To explore the option of extending a programme of improved events, working with partners if resources can be freed up by other changes.
2.2	To explore an increase community language provision if resources can be freed up by other changes to the service.
2.3	To pursue the option of improving signage, entrances and interiors.
2.4	To improve libraries' IT offer if the resources can be freed up.
2.5	To explore the promotion of digital books and materials if resources can be freed up by other options and subject to Croydon's contribution being fair to TLC's other members.
2.6	To pursue the option of training staff for more interactive support role if the resources can be freed up.
3.1	To explore further co-locating libraries and other services and closer collaboration with CALAT.
3.2	To pursue increased IT and checkout self-service in order to free staff for a more interactive support role.
3.3	To continue with in-house management of the library service and membership of The Libraries Consortium but explore the potential for community management of individual libraries at risk of closure.
3.4	To invest in increasing the number and scope of volunteers.

Option	Recommendation
3.5	To explore further the introduction of a venue hire service in order to generate income from library spaces and to revisit café provision once attendances have increased at Norbury Library.
3.6	To pursue investing in energy efficiency.

10.18   The option of reversing the cut to the library budget (option 1.1) is not recommended in the light of the Council's financial position. Options for alternative management arrangements for the library service were explored in option 3.3. In that option, the potential for outsourcing or spinning out the service into a charitable body were considered but were not recommended.

Exploring the option of closures

10.19   Library managers are very reluctant to propose closures but believe that this is the only way to improve the overall performance of the service given that it is very unlikely that the Council will be able to increase funding to the service. Although some of the other options are designed to deliver some savings from efficiencies, these would not deliver enough to fund more than a handful of the improvement measures.

10.20   The main way to release sufficient funds to deliver more improvements across the service would be to close a number of the poorer performing and less viable library buildings.

10.21   In Appendix C, we summarise all of the borough's libraries and consider their performance and viability and the impact of closure. More details on each library can be found in Appendix F which includes detailed site profiles for each library which help to inform these options.

10.22   We recommend four libraries to be considered for closure, subject to formal consultation, together with a number of measures to deal with some of the effects of closure. The remaining library services are proposed to be retained with investment and improvements in the service offer and delivery model including relocation, colocation and closer partnership with other services to deliver a sustainable service model.

10.23   The recommendations are based on analysis on a set of assessment criteria designed to address the gaps that need to be bridged in order to achieve the outcomes for the review:

Table 10.4: summary of assessment criteria for retaining a library

Criterion	Factors to consider
Performance	**Usage** including visits and issues. **Event attendances** and attendances for other activities. **PC hours in use.** - Unit costs, ie **cost per visitor**.
Location	The **visibility** and prominence of the building.

	• The level of natural **footfall** in the vicinity. • **Public transport access** for users.
Building	• The **suitability** of the building to accommodate the full range of library uses (ie Universal Offers). • The **adaptability** of the building allowing for various uses. • The overall **condition** of the building and the extent of remedial work required.
Impacts of change	• The approximate size of the **population served**. • The **extent of deprivation** in the catchment area. • **Other public facilities** in the vicinity, including **other libraries**. • The extent of **existing community group use**. • The **number of volunteers**.

Recommended closures and the need for investment in rest

10.24   The four proposed closures are designed to release resources to invest in increasing the opening hours in the remaining libraries and to fund initiatives such as the introduction of targeted outreach for those most in need in the borough (see section above).

10.25   It is envisaged that the libraries recommended for retention are also subject to a range of improvements, including refurbishments, improved interior design and better signage. Three library sites (New Addington, South Norwood and Purley) require more extensive redevelopment and remodelling of the library service as part of a wider offer to deliver sustainable and impactful provision.

10.26   In some cases, it is recommended that opportunities should be sought for moving the library service to a better location and building and to exploring colocation. This may not be possible for immediate implementation but would take place over time as regeneration schemes develop that would allow change to be achieved in a cost-effective way. Any such changes to a building would need to be subject to a clear business case and further consultation.

Table 10.5: recommendations for libraries to be retained

Library	Recommendations
Ashburton	• Retain Ashburton Library Service. • Upgrade the interior design of the library.
Central	• Retain Central Library Service. • Look for an alternative location in a more suitable building at the heart of the changing shopping district.
Coulsdon	• Retain Coulsdon Library Service. • Explore further involvement of the Hive in the library. • Explore the remodelling of the library to provide direct access to the community garden. • Invest in refurbishing the library's interior.
New Addington	• Retain New Addington Library Service. • Research the barriers to library use in New Addington and introduce active outreach. • Explore partnership models of service delivery to improve the offer and attraction for residents.
Norbury	• Retain the Norbury Library Service. • Review the operating model for the building including options to license space for hire or tenancy to generate income and footfall. • Explore with community organisations their interest in the building and/or community management of the library. • Research the barriers to library use in areas of high deprivation in Norbury for active outreach. • Assess the impact on the different ethnic groups in the catchment area and of the wider equalities impact.
Purley	• Retain the Purley Library Service. • Seek a better location and building for Purley Library. • Explore local partnerships to develop the offer and service model
Selsdon	• Retain Selsdon Library Service. • Extend its staffed opening hours so that it can play a more active part in the cultural and community life in the south of the borough. • Introduce improved signage and market its presence, particularly to users of Sanderstead Library.
South Norwood	• Retain South Norwood Library Service. • Explore opportunities to develop plans for an improved community facility jointly with the Samuel Coleridge Taylor youth centre. • Engage with community and voluntary groups to develop a viable model for the site development and operation.
Thorton Heath	• Retain Thornton Health Library Service. • Invest in minor refurbishment. • Target library outreach from this facility and into the wider community, focusing on the most deprived.

10.27 It is recommended that four libraries are considered for closures, subject to extensive public consultation as described in Chapter 11. In each case further work is required to identify the impacts of closures and any mitigating measures that can be put in place.

Table 10.6: recommendations for libraries to be considered for closure

Library	Recommendations
Bradmore Green	• Consider Bradmore Green Library building for closure. • Consider targeted outreach work on the Tollers Estate. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.
Broad Green	• Consider Broad Green Library building for closure. • Research the barriers to library use in local areas of high deprivation for active outreach. • Assess the impact on the different ethnic groups in the catchment area and of the wider equalities impact. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.
Sanderstead	• Consider Sanderstead Library building for closure. • Explore the level of community interest in retaining the building. • Explore the particular impacts on people with mobility issues that might prevent them making use of another library. • Explore options for Library Link provision to serve the community impacted by closure.
Shirley	• Consider Shirley Library building for closure. • Consult Bromley Council over potential arrangements for Croydon residents to use West Wickham Library. • Explore the particular needs of residents in the most deprived LSOAs and the Shrublands estate • Explore potential mitigations for the older community in the catchment area. • Explore opportunities to deliver a library link service offer for the community impacted by closure.

10.28 **Given our conclusion that it is not feasible for the Council to spend more on the library service, improvements to the service would need to be found from savings elsewhere in the library service's budget.**

10.29 **Saving money by closing some libraries would release significant resources which could fund many of the improvements recommended above and transform the ability of the service to encourage more people to use the service, especially those that need it most.**

11. The new model and vision for the service

Introduction

11.1   As outlined above, the current service model is not meeting the current needs of Croydon's residents well, and there is very limited capacity to develop the offer or outreach to engage more residents.

11.2   The fixed service with teams of staff stretched across 13 buildings limits the opportunity to develop a local offer, responsive to local needs and priorities or to develop partnerships with other services to enhance the service and deliver across the Universal Offers.

11.3   In this section we will outline the key priorities to address with the library service model, and the emerging framework to achieve this.

11.4   It is important to note, that this is framework is still formative and will be further explored, tested and co-designed through the consultation period.

Key themes informing the service model

11.5   A common theme across the primary research engagement was that Croydon's libraries should be community hubs, providing accessible, welcoming, safe spaces, offering a broad range of activities and information services and a place for people to meet and connect with others in their community.

11.6   People also felt that the library service should be more responsive to local need and demand. A one size fits all offer in Croydon doesn't work and the service should be adaptable and focussed on delivering on the needs and priorities in each locality.

11.7   There was a strong perception that communication and marketing of the service offer is not good enough and more needs to be done to improve this and tell people what's available and how they can use libraries.

11.8   There are clear opportunities for more involvement and partnership working with other services and voluntary groups and to develop the volunteer programme more, but that this would need resourcing and managing well to be effective.

11.9   We have learned through the review that by prioritising retaining 13 library buildings and reducing to part time hours, the Council has continued to support the core library user base who have adapted and continued to use the services when they are open. These users value their local library and make good use of the offer available.

11.10   However there are many users who are now unable to use their local library because it is now only open two to three days per week with limited weekend opening and no evenings. This particularly impacts working people and families.

11.11   Footfall and active user numbers in the libraries have declined significantly from pre-pandemic rates and whilst this can be expected to a degree following the reduction in opening hours, without a new model to drive growth and engagement the library user base will decline over time.

11.12   The reduction in staffing numbers has also severely limited the capacity of the service to undertake outreach and engagement, particularly with regard to communities who are often less likely to use libraries but could benefit more from the services.

11.13   The ongoing financial pressure on the Council prevents any increase in the library services budgets and therefore a new service model is required to allow for resources to be reallocated to address these challenges.

What might deliver the outcomes

11.14   The emerging service vision and model has been developed to address the challenges identified and deliver the three outcomes identified to achieve a successful service in Croydon.

Outcome 1: We are reaching more people

- A network of modernised library buildings will be open for five days a week, including some evening provision and every library open on Saturdays

- A community based library link offer will be available to provide access to information, support and library services in areas without a local library building and deliver a localised offer responsive to need

- A community outreach and marketing programme will ensure the library offer is better communicated and understood by residents

Outcome 2: We have improved our service to the whole community.

- We will invest in the retained library buildings to improve the facilities and develop space for hire and events to expand the offer

- We will establish a dedicated staff member to focus on partnerships and engagement, expanding the volunteering programme and bringing a broader range of services into the libraries for residents to access in one place

- We will establish regular resident engagement forums to stay connected to local need and priorities and involve residents in the library service development

Outcome 3: Our service is more efficient.

- We will reallocate resources to where it will have the greatest impact. This includes releasing expenditure from the maintenance and repair of the smaller buildings to invest in library staff and services for residents.

- We will increase income generation through creating spaces for hire in the libraries

The emerging vision

11.15   The emerging vision has been developed following review of the primary and secondary research undertaken. This is intended as a formative proposal for the future model of the library service and will be developed further through extensive public consultation, research and codesign.

11.16   We want to enable people who live, work or study in Croydon to benefit from a high quality library service which delivers opportunities for reading, learning, creating and connecting online and with others through each stage of life.

11.17   We propose this is delivered across four strands:

- **Library Hubs**

   A smaller network of more accessible and welcoming buildings delivering an extensive offer of books, wi-fi, PCs, study space, events and a Library Universal Offers programme. Open 5-6 days a week including every Saturday with the majority of hours staffed and extended hours with self-service access available from at least four sites. These sites will act as focal points for services in their local areas with a broad service offer of reading, digital, health and culture delivered by the Council and community partners. We anticipate that Library Hub buildings will also host other services and partners aligned to the library Universal Offers, with the library as the primary anchor service.

- **Community Hubs**

   A library situated in a shared venue as part of a wider service offer for residents, for example as part of a Family Hub, Adult Learning Hub, Health and Wellbeing Hub or VCFS Hub.
   These sites would include dedicated library space to hold a range of book collections for children and adults, provide Wi-Fi and public computer access and host events and activities. The service offer and opening times would be developed in response to local need and would include weekend provision.
   We envisage that this model of embedded colocation and partnership would attract more people to engage with the library service offer and would provide a more holistic service for residents. The delivery of this offer could include developing existing library buildings into Community Hubs, relocating a library service into a different building or exploring different models of delivering the library offer through partnership with other services or groups.

- **Library Outreach**

   Outreach activity is essential to reach people not currently engaged with the library service offer, to raise awareness of the library offer and to provide access to library services for residents who are not able to physically visit a Library Hub or Community Hub. We propose that this is delivered over three strands:

   1. Library Links will provide a regular contact point with the library service in localities without a building based library service. Delivered from other community venues on

a weekly basis, the offer would be developed based on local need but could include: an information service, community book collections, children and adults events, digital support sessions and support to access library services online.

Service provision would be delivered through a combination of library staff, volunteers and grant funded partners to deliver library programmes and events in community settings. We propose commencing with a pilot phase of four initial Library Link services focussed on catering to communities most impacted by any library closures with a second phase of delivery focussed on a further four areas with low library engagement and high need across the borough.

2. Expansion of the Home Library service which delivers books and resources to residents who are housebound, resident in care homes or otherwise unable to access library buildings.

3. Library service visits and activities at other community provision including schools and education services, dementia cafes, health care centres, community events and festivals. This is an established way to promote library services and the benefits of library usage, register new members and support residents to access library services and information.

•   **Library Online**

An extensive digital offer including e-books and magazines, online learning and training resources and access to Museum and Archive digital resources.

11.18   It is important to note that the service operating budget remains low when benchmarked with neighbouring boroughs and the library service will continue to operate leanly. However we feel that this model provides a sustainable framework to deliver on the service outcomes and enables greater responsiveness to changing demographics and needs.

11.19   Further research is needed to develop the framework through the consultation process including the location, designs and piloting of Library Link points, further analysis on the equalities implications for the changes and more work to understand the barriers to access and priorities for residents not currently using the service.

EQIA for the future options

11.20   A detailed Equality Impact Assessment is included at Appendix D. This will be reviewed and updated following the consultation and the findings will be used to inform changes to the new model.

The proposals for consultation

11.21   We now propose that the Council commences formal consultation on the options identified above.

Summary of each recommended option(s)

- A - Adoption of the new model outlined above including closure of the four local libraries (Bradmore Green, Broad Green, Sanderstead and Shirley) and remodelling of the offer and provision for New Addington, South Norwood and Purley.

- B - Alternative suggestions to deliver service improvement in a cost neutral model

11.22   The consultation activity would include:

- An online survey with printed copies available in libraries
- A series of public events held in libraries
- A series of online events to gather feedback
- Engagement with other community groups, partners and organisations such as resident associations including promotion of the survey and attendance at other community meetings to take feedback
- A digital communications campaign to maximise the reach of the survey and ensure as wide a response as possible
- Targeted engagement to reach library users and non-library users and to reach residents representative of the borough population and with regard to the Equality Act characteristics
- Focussed engagement and service development workshops with communities and groups around South Norwood, New Addington and Purley.
- Engagement meetings to understand the impact of the library closures and further develop mitigations
- Engagement with groups interested to operate libraries or become more involved in their governance

11.23   The consultation questions will explore:

- Respondents' current library use and use of other community services
- Their priorities and aspirations for a library service offer and that of other services relevant to the library Universal Offers
- Their views on the proposals and the service model outlined above
- Ideas and partnership opportunities for the three proposed Community Hubs (New Addington, South Norwood, Purley).
- The views of those affected by the proposed library closures (Bradmore Green, Broad Green, Sanderstead, Shirley) including on potential mitigation measure and alternative options
- Any other ideas to improve the impact, effectiveness and efficiency of the library service

11.24   A framework has been established to collate all responses and contributions to the consultation which will be analysed and considered in the review of the proposals. The findings of the consultation and this analysis will be presented back to Cabinet alongside the final proposals for the service.