Appendix E

Engagement findings so far

1. Our approach

Introduction

1.1 In this appendix, we describe our engagement methodology, our findings, and list the various individuals and organisations that we have engaged with during this phase of the project.

1.2 **This summary takes into account the most recent public consultation in 2021 ahead of the next round of public consultation on the proposals summarised in the main report (Appendix A).**

Our methodology

The scope of our work

1.3 Our research has combined primary and secondary research to analyse previous consultation responses, which led to the changes implemented in 2022, as well as current views among community groups, library staff and Council officers.

1.4 We used four main methods for gathering people's views:

- **A desktop review of 2021 consultation findings,** where members of the public were consulted in two phases on potential service options and subsequently 3 shortlisted options.

- **3 external briefings** with friends groups, community groups and members of the public who were active participants in the last consultation.

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

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

1.5 At this stage, external engagement has focused on groups who feel strongly about libraries in Croydon.

1.6 During the next round of formal consultation on future proposals it will be essential to canvass Croydon residents widely, particularly those under-represented in previous consultations, especially those likely to be most affected by any proposals.

Our research brief

1.7 Together with the Council's project team, we agreed the principal themes for our research through our 'Key Lines of Enquiry' which are a set of themes we aimed to explore in our research.

Table E1: our key lines of enquiry

a. How the current service meets the greatest needs in the borough.

b. The quality of Croydon's library network.

c. The impact of the 2022 changes.

d. Making more efficient use of assets.

e. Learning from elsewhere.

f. How people feel about future changes to their libraries.

g. Scope for more voluntary and community involvement.

Desktop review of 2021 consultations – overview

1.8 We conducted a desktop review of the two rounds of public consultation hosted by the Council. In the first round the public were invited to share their broader priorities and ideas for what could change in the library service, and a set of options including closures, community management and cuts to opening hours.

1.9 A second round of consultation followed in July after Cabinet had decided to consider three shortlisted options in order to achieve the savings target – Reduce service hours by 21% across the borough; outsource all libraries; or reduce service hours (two days per week) in eight libraries and create five community run libraries.

1.10 As the participants were self-selecting, their views may or may not be representative of the diverse demography of the people and communities who live, work and study within Croydon.

External briefings – overview

1.11 We conducted three external briefings (September/October 2023) involving 18 people, who spoke on behalf of a range of Friends Groups, community groups and as members of the public. The external briefings were targeted at groups who had participated in previous Croydon library consultations and were designed to explore the perspectives of both library users and non-users. External briefing participants were invited to participate through the library service's existing network of groups and known users.

1.12 The discussion themes for the three external briefings were informed by our Key Lines of Enquiry and the national library Universal Offers.

1.13 We are grateful to all external briefing participants for taking the time to volunteer, attend and share their thoughts with us. We were struck by participants' demonstrable passion for their local libraries and their awareness of what each library currently offers and has the potential to do more of in future. We have anonymised their comments in this report.

1.14 It should be stressed that these were short meetings designed to brief attendees that the Council had begun a review of the changes made in 2022 and to ask some initial

questions about their views on those changes. In the formal consultation process on the proposals, there will be opportunities for more extended and in-depth discussions.

Staff 'idea generation' workshops – overview

1.15 A cross-section of 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. The workshops also offered opportunities for informal Q&A and open discussions.

1.16 Staff shared their thoughts on how far they felt the current service was from 'good', focused on four core perspectives – customer, processes, staffing, finances – plus 'anything else' that they felt was key. We have included summaries of their contributions in the sections which follow.

1.17 The workshops were positive, and we were struck by the enthusiasm and knowledge shown by all of the attendees. We are very grateful for their time and input.

Interviews – overview

1.18 We conducted 14 interviews and small group conversations with 23 key Council senior officers and service leads. Their practical knowledge and experience has been invaluable to the findings in this report.

The strength and breadth of people's perceptions and opinions

1.19 We have not sought to evaluate or 'weight' people's perceptions or opinions, but we have drawn out those that we think highlight a key theme or shared viewpoint effectively. We have drawn out those views that were particularly common but have also included examples of significant or interesting 'minority' views that should be heard. At the end of each section, we have also highlighted the key findings that inform our recommendations.

1.20 The list of external organisations we have spoken with so far is included at Annex 1 to this appendix.

2. Review of 2021 consultations

Introduction

2.1 In the sections below, we review the results of the two rounds of consultation in 2021 and report a summary of the most significant responses.

2.2 During these previous consultations, the public were invited to share their thoughts on Croydon's libraries; their priorities and ideas for what could change in the future, and the options for realising required savings of £500,000 from the library budget.

2.3 The consultation surveys were publicised via the Council's communication channels and in each library. The Council received 2,510 survey responses to the March 2021 (Phase 1) consultation and 1,411 survey responses to the July 2021 (Phase 2) consultation.

2.4 Whilst these two surveys generated several thousand responses, we stress that it should be kept in mind that the consultation was openly publicised and available to anyone to complete. As a result, the participants were self-selecting, and their views may not be representative of the diverse demography of the people and communities who live, work and study within Croydon.

2.5 It is also worth noting that the consultation activity took place during periods heavily impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic which may have limited the response rate and opportunities for people to engage with public meetings and share feedback directly with library staff.

The key documents we have reviewed

Background

2.6 The **key documents** covering the process for, and findings from, the public consultation exercises, are:

Phase 1

- "SUMMARY OF 17 May 2021 CABINET MEETING OUTCOME"

- "Libraries Consultation Phase 1 Summary of Survey Feedback 2021"

Phase 2

- "Appendix one – Croydon Libraries consultation Phase 2 Summary July 2021"

- "Libraries Consultation Phase 2 Results"

March 2021 (Phase 1) – key findings

Consultation methods and response rates

2.7   We observe the consultation methods used, and the following points, from the documents, including the weight of feedback from local residents:

- There were 2,510 survey responses which include 38 paper forms and 2 telephone feedback calls which were added to the online survey. Also:

  o   2 letters

  o   15 direct emails

  o   3 Focus group reports with young people:

  o   Croydon Savings survey results

  o   SPRA (Spring Park Resident's Association) Response to the Library Consultation on closure plans (Shirley)

  o   Petition of 4,007 signatures from Save Croydon Libraries Campaign

2.8   We observe the consultation process followed, and the following points of note, from the documents:

- 'The first phase of the libraries public consultation ran from 14th January to 14th March 2021. This was a formative process that allowed residents to provide feedback on options to close up to five libraries, consider community run opportunities, or to look at other models that would achieve the savings target'.

- 'Libraries services have savings targets of 15% in 2022/23. As a statutory service public consultation must be conducted if there is a reduction in service'.

- '… Feedback from residents and 30th March 2021 Scrutiny meeting shaped a second, more detailed, proposal on the future of Libraries provision in Croydon'.

2.9   We also note the following points made by the Council referring to **the next steps that *followed* the end of the Phase 1 consultation**, and were **the basis for the Phase 2 consultation**:

'The report appraises several options based upon achieving the savings target and the impact upon the service and residents.

The options were considered at Cabinet meeting on Monday 17th May 2021 and there was an agreement that the three which achieved the savings would go back out to public consultation.

Cabinet rejected the proposal to close five libraries or create completely separate community run libraries on the basis that those proposals would not deliver all the required savings.

Below are the options considered, with the three options going forward **highlighted**:
- Close five libraries

- **Reduce service hours by 21% across the borough**
- Five community run libraries
- **Outsource all libraries**
- Hybrid – reduction in service hours (one day per week) to eight libraries and five community run libraries
- **Hybrid – reduction in service hours (two days per week) to eight libraries and five community run libraries**

The final survey results were reported on 30th March 2021 to Scrutiny & Overview Committee, which recommended developing the emerging options in more detail. The Cabinet Paper and supporting documents presented six detailed options for review on 17th May 2021, recommending the three options which could achieve the £500,000 savings. Cabinet agreed the three options initially, and the decision was called back into Scrutiny on 27th May 2021. Following the discussion in Scrutiny, it was decided to proceed with the Cabinet decision to take the following three options to a Phase 2 consultation from 1st June 2021:

- Reduce service hours by 21% across the borough
- Outsource all libraries
- Reduce service hours (two days per week) in eight libraries and create five community run libraries'.

Survey results – Phase 1 consultation

2.10   The overwhelming majority of respondents, **over 90%, were members of Croydon Libraries.** In addition, feedback from the free text question identified that many non-members were the parents of children who are members; use Libraries for other activities that do not require membership; or have previously been a member or plan on becoming a member after lockdown.

2.11   In response to the question, 'what are your three most important library services?' 2299 respondents out of 2510 respondents (91.59%) replied:

Table E2: responses to 'what are your three most important library services?'

Response	Number of Respondents	% Respondents (2302)
Browsing and borrowing books	**1995**	**86.78%**
Rhymetimes/children's activities	**740**	**32.19%**
Space to work or research	**512**	**22.27%**
Using computers	**411**	**17.88%**
Printing	316	13.75%
Talks for adults	308	13.4%
Space to sit and relax	297	12.92%
Seasonal and craft activities for children	293	12.74%
Storytimes	248	10.79%
After school/homework	233	10.13%
Online virtual library	186	8.09%
Free Wi-Fi	186	8.09%
Wellbeing activities	179	7.79%
Reading groups	148	6.44%
Seasonal and craft activities for adults	125	5.44%
Other	106	4.61%
My library app	70	3.04%
Digital skills/job clubs	57	2.48%
Home library service	40	1.74%

2.12   To the free text question "Is there anything you feel is missing from our library service?", residents identified: more books; access to refreshments; longer opening hours/outside of normal working patterns; improved promotion of events and activities; modern and welcoming spaces; improved furniture; contactless/card payment.

2.13   Other feedback reported by the Council includes:

"Respondents told us that the following would make libraries more relevant to them: Opening their local libraries post-COVID, more comfortable modern spaces, better resources including books, more digital resources, a café, better local promotion and more activities.

Opening hours: 137 respondents from Question 8, and 13 respondents from Question 9 said opening hours pre-COVID19 were not suited to their needs or prevented them from using Croydon Libraries, and suggested longer opening hours and additional open days.

- *Later opening times, maybe one or two evenings per week so I could visit on the way home from work.*
- *Opening later in evenings and on Sundays. Opening times exclude working people."*

July 2021 (Phase 2) – key findings

Introduction

2.14 From our desktop review of previous consultation findings, we observe the following points and feedback from Croydon residents.

Consultation methods and response rates

2.15 We note the consultation methods used, and the following points, from the documents, including the weight of feedback from local residents:

- 'Summary of Consultation Feedback

    o Online/paper survey accessed by 1,411 respondents

    o Webinars; Recordings and FAQs from the two sessions

    o Face to face discussions with 343 residents at meetings in all libraries

    o Spring Parks Residents Association (SPRA) Response to the Consultation March 2021, resubmitted for July 2021

    o 3 emails and 1 letter submission'

Recurring themes

2.16 We note the 'recurring themes' that came out of the Phase 2 engagement forums, including 'face to face events, the webinars and completed surveys'. It was indicated that the Council would 'incorporate' these into the library service's 'new operating model to improve services':

- **'Better publicity about opening hours and activities;**

- **Call on Resident's Associations and other community networks for support**

- Pleased with digital services but request **support sessions for use of online resources**

- Interested in **volunteering to support the libraries'.**

2.17 In relation to Option 1 ('reduction of service hours by 21%'), we note the highlighted resident concerns and requests:

- 'When you reduce hours, you **must be open on Saturdays and evenings** or you discriminate against working people and students

- **Could the community provide support by providing relevant activities and making the building available out of out of hours**?

- We **do not feel safe with the concept of Open+** and feel this will discriminate against women and young people'.

Survey results in response to the proposed options

2.18   We note from the document that there were 1,411 returned survey forms.

2.19   We have **highlighted in bold** to draw attention to the highest percentage of respondents received for each Option and other key points of interest.

Table E3: Phase 2 – consultation survey responses (July 2021)

OPTION 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 1: Reduce library service hours by 21% across the borough? 987 respondents		
Responses	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage of Respondents**
Strongly agree	183	18.54%
Agree	**369**	**37.39%**
Disagree	159	16.11%
Strongly disagree	211	21.38%
Not sure	65	6.59%

OPTION 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 2: Outsource the management of all 13 libraries? 957 respondents		
Responses	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage of Respondents**
Strongly agree	32	3.34%
Agree	131	13.69%
Disagree	191	19.96%
Strongly disagree	**481**	**50.26%**
Not sure	122	12.75%

OPTION 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Option 3: Five community-run libraries and reduce opening hours for 8 libraries? 939 respondents		
Responses	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage of Respondents**
Strongly agree	42	4.47%
Agree	189	20.13%
Disagree	231	24.60%
Strongly disagree	**312**	**33.23%**
Not sure	165	17.57%

2.20   In summary, feedback from respondents to the survey in Phase 2 was:

- Option 1 (**reduce library hours by 21%): 56% agreed**, or strongly agreed, with the proposal; 37% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

- Option 2 (**outsource the management of all 13 libraries**): 17% agreed, or strongly agreed; **70% disagreed,** or strongly disagreed.

- Option 3 (**five community run libraries and reduced opening hours for eight libraries**): 25% agreed, or strongly agreed; **58% disagreed**, or strongly disagreed.

2.21 We note the significant **drop-off in the response rate** between the total forms received and the number of people answering the questions about preference between the three options proposed (roughly 30% of the total).

2.22 From the documents, we note the points that:

- 'There is a **significant preference across all ethnic groups for option one**: Reduce opening hours by 21% across all libraries, with some agreeing that either outsourcing or community managed options are viable alternatives'.

- 'In the free text responses to options one and two, **respondents urged the Council to seek support from the community**, and to **ensure there was more community involvement and resident engagement with libraries in future**, and **a co-production approach to libraries service development**. The **Council will continue to work with community groups with the aim of addressing this aspiration'**.

- 'Although **the offer of the Home Library Service and digital services were a mitigation for some** residents, they **did not replace an open local library**, accessible to those with **disability**, providing library staff, books and activities. There will be **future engagement with this group during implementation'**.

- 'The overall feedback was that **option one – reduce service hours by 21% across the borough – would be the only acceptable option of the three**, but **a reduction in services and opening hours would have a potential significant impact on residents with certain protected characteristics**, including age (older adults, babies, children and mothers), maternity/pregnancy, disability and ethnicity. There will be **future engagement with this groups about opening hours and activities during implementation** to ensure equalities concerns are monitored and mitigated'.

Equalities Impact Assessment

2.23 We observe the following points of note summarised in the documents:

'The Equalities Impact Assessment identified that for specific residents with protected characteristics there might be a more significant impact, and so it was important to analyse responses in detail to plan mitigations.

Age Groups

Options 1 and 2: Reduction in opening hours is likely to have **a disproportionate impact on some age groups:**

- **Families with young children** (time, logistics, cost)

- **Adults without digital access; jobless** (especially in Broad Green and South Norwood)

- **Seniors** who have told us it is difficult to travel (cost, fear of crime, fear of injury)

- **School children after school and school organized visits** (not reflected in data, in free text)

Feedback from over 50% of residents responding to the Phase 2 Libraries Consultation expressed a preference for Option 1 because it would mean a Council managed service and felt that a distribution of reduced hours across all libraries was a fair approach. However, the actual opening hours needed to be convenient for the community and further engagement with residents is essential for implementation.

Maternity & Pregnancy:

The EIA noted that proposals were considered likely to have an impact on certain age groups, including the youngest and oldest adults, mothers, school children, adults seeking jobs

Regarding Maternity and Pregnancy, there was feedback from the survey and from face to face meetings highlighting the **potential for a significant negative impact to reducing service hours if the opening hours were not accessible**. **Accessible hours would include Saturdays and evenings** for working mothers, and local mothers wanted to be involved in decisions about opening hours and the scheduling of activities, because this group could not easily travel to a nearby open library when their local library was closed. To mitigate this impact, **the Council will continue to engage with communities in implementing the reduction of hours at specific libraries**.

Option 1 Reduce library service hours by 21%: Respondents from this group chose "disagree" and "strongly disagree" because they did not want any reduction in hours; if this option went ahead, they wanted regular Rhymetimes and opening hours that were mother & child friendly, and offered **Saturdays and evenings for working mothers…**

Option 2 Outsource libraries: Some respondents preferred this option because it kept all libraries open and some pointed out that it worked in other boroughs. Other respondents were concerned that an organisation dependent on profit would not be focussed on the community and would start charging for baby and toddler activities.

Option 3 Five community-run libraries and reduce opening hours for 8 libraries: Many respondents preferred this option because they **felt a community run library would provide more activities for mothers and toddlers**, but were not pleased about reduced hours in the other libraries. Some respondents expressed **concern that community run libraries, with a dependency on local volunteers, would not be sustainable** and that the libraries would eventually close.

Disability

The overall feedback regarding the impact of the options for disabled library users was that **option one would be the only acceptable option of the three**, but a reduction in

services and opening hours would **have a significant impact on the wellbeing of residents with a disability**. It was noted **that residents with mobility issues could not easily travel to other libraries,** especially not to those without parking nearby. Opening hours needed to allow for quiet times which were more disabled friendly, activities and volunteering opportunities. To mitigate the impact**, the Council will continue to engage with residents with a disability during our planning to implementing reduce hours across the specific library sites**.

Option 1 Reduce Service hours by 21%: this option was preferred over the other options, but many saying **reduced access to the library set out in this option will have a negative impact on vulnerable and disabled residents**. They **disagreed or strongly disagreed with all three options on the basis that any reduction in service would have a negative impact on them**.

… Although Home Library Service and digital services were a mitigation for some residents, they did not replace an open local library, accessible to those with disability, providing library staff, books and activities.

There are **over 1,000 registered library members who have stated they have a disability** and they are registered in all library branches, so the impact is across the entire service. If reduced, **the service will work with disabled residents in each branch to ensure the opening hours are suitable for people with disability'**.

2.24   We suggest that these headline observations about the impact on Croydon residents should continue to be considered by the Council in any future options proposed for the library service, and to help ensure the service's future statutory duty compliance in line with previous DCMS consultation advice.

Summary of findings from two phases of consultation in 2021

Table E4: Previous public consultation in March 2021 (Phase 1) – our key findings

- Residents taking part highlighted that although many did have access to the internet from home that they were aware that other local residents did not have internet access at home and that **the library service helped to bridge the digital divide**.

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

- The three **most important things that respondents reported as missing from the library service** were: **Resources** (books, newspapers) ('Improvements to quality book stock; more books'); **Activities** ('Improved and additional activities for all ages'), and **Opening Hours** ('Lack of evening & weekend opening hours a barrier').

- Further feedback indicates the **additional thoughts that participants have about the things they feel are missing from the library service** including**: more books; access to refreshments; longer opening hours/outside of normal working patterns; improved promotion of events and activities; modern and welcoming spaces; improved furniture, and contactless/card payment.**

- Participants in the consultation said that **the following would make libraries more relevant to them**: **Opening their local libraries post-COVID, more comfortable modern spaces, better resources including books, more digital resources, a café, better local promotion** and **more activities**.

- On the specific issue of **opening hours**: 137 respondents said **opening hours pre-Covid were not suited to their needs or prevented them from using Croydon libraries**, and suggested they **would like longer opening hours and additional open days**.

Table E5: Previous public consultation in July 2021 (Phase 2) – our key findings

- The headline consultation findings from both phases, including the quantity of responses indicating **the strength of local resident feeling**, should continue to be recognised by the Council in any future options proposed for the library service.

- In response to the Option 1 proposal (**reduce library hours by 21%**): **56% agreed, or strongly agreed**; 37% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

- In response to the Option 2 proposal (o**utsource the management of all 13 libraries**): 17% agreed, or strongly agreed; **70% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.**

- In response to the Option 3 (**five community run libraries and reduced opening hours for eight libraries**) proposal: 25% agreed, or strongly agreed; **58% disagreed, or strongly disagreed.**

- There were a number of **recurring themes** that were noted as part of the consultation findings. It was indicated that the Council would incorporate these into the library service's 'new operating model to improve services':

  - 'Better **publicity about opening hours and activities.**

  - **Call on resident associations and other community networks for support**.

  - **Digital services support sessions** for use of online resources.

  - **Volunteering** to support the libraries.

- There were a number of resident concerns noted as part of the consultation findings, including:

  - The importance of ensuring that residents understood the supporting information.

  - Concerns that library closures during COVID lockdown were permanent closures.

  - Concerns that local libraries would close. Libraries were recognised by residents as being 'important for wellbeing'; 'a lifeline'; 'respite', and 'brings community together'.

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

3. KLOE a: how the current service meets the greatest needs in the borough

What people have told us

What's come out of the external briefings

3.1 In our external briefing conversations with Library Friends and community groups, we heard the views summarised below.

3.2 The most significant requirement we heard was the need to **revisit the current opening hours** at all libraries. Almost every group told us 'the hours aren't working', and of the need for 'more accessible hours of opening'. Many groups felt '**Saturday and evening opening'** was **highly important**. One person suggested this was particularly the case 'for students and working people', in particular 'working parents', which the majority of people in that particular discussion agreed with.

3.3 Conduct '**wider engagement' with users** ('and national bodies, campaign groups') to understand local needs in order to have **'locally informed solutions** for each library'. Two people underlined the importance of the '**EQIA'** and 'looking at **local data on usage'** to inform a future service offer that responded to local needs but urged the Council to offer a library service '**not just for the hard to reach and vulnerable'**.

3.4 Libraries as **'community' and/or 'wellbeing' hubs**: the concept of 'hubs' came up several times in conversations. The definition of 'hub' wasn't strictly defined in the conversations but could perhaps be interpreted as a focal point for local community activities, accessing information, and somewhere to access co-located public services. People told us these hubs could be '**more than somewhere to just take out a book'**; 'a **community resource'**; somewhere for '**cohesion** and **mental wellbeing'** and that 'if we were able to develop our libraries to do all those things, that would be really good'. One person suggested that libraries have 'to **be a destination'**, sharing a range of ideas for collocated activities including 'Councillors bringing their surgery back; the library opening on a Saturday; housing; or a credit union bringing in sessions'.

3.5 An **expanded technology offer**: some individuals asked that it be deployed 'carefully' and not at the expense of paid staff. Several individuals identified **the role that Open+ could play** with 'support to librarians' and expanded 'opening hours'. There was also a perception amongst several people that there are 'particularly **high usage rates for PCs'** in Croydon.

3.6 Address individual **security concerns** and '**response times'**: several anecdotal examples were shared where alarms had been rung on site and security response times had been considered slow. These experiences had been concerning to the affected people, who had shared their observations back with fellow users and groups, which in turn had grown further local fears and concerns.

3.7 **At least one 'professional' librarian on site**: several groups told us that 'having a professional member of staff really makes a difference' to user experience. Positive

feedback about the library staff and an appreciation of the job they did **in challenging circumstances** was received across all of the groups.

3.8 Several people felt that many of the needs that others had highlighted as part of the group discussions were 'all **consistent with what we've found in the past'** and acknowledging that there was ''**no obvious solution'**.

3.9 Issues around **the approach to communication, and consultation**, about **local needs** and keeping residents **informed about Croydon's library service offer** was mentioned several times. People made a number of observations, including that 'the service needed to get out and reach the people who you are not reaching at the moment – (*use*) social media, WhatsApp groups… word of mouth – try everything'; 'people are willing to lend expertise and time – the Council needs to use it – if you don't tap in, it will go away again', and 'spreading and getting information out there'.

What's come out of the officer interviews

3.10 In our conversations, we heard how it was **important for the Council's strategic leaders to agree a new vision for the future role of libraries** in Croydon, in response to the changing needs of Croydon's residents.

3.11 Libraries are perceived by officers to continue **to play a valued role within the community** and are increasingly seen as **a platform to support people beyond the written word**, e.g. with addressing digital exclusion, digital poverty and health outcomes.

3.12 Officers told us that residents require **signposting support to help them navigate public services.** We heard how the Council, and libraries, need to **adapt its approach to the promotion and marketing of its services** to residents.

3.13 Some officers perceive that wider social appetite for free physical books via public libraries may be in decline.

3.14 Reflecting on the range of views and ideas expressed, we observe that **there is no clear shared officer 'future vision' for what Croydon's library service should be**.

3.15 Some perceive that the library service is currently **trying 'to be all things to all people'** but could also be considered '**very traditional'** and **'sleepy'**.

Which aspects of the library service offer are currently most in demand? How does this relate to the local community profile (demographic and infrastructure)?

3.16 Officers perceive that Croydon's library service offer **can be 'so much more'** and that there is an opportunity with this transformation project to explore those possibilities further.

3.17 It is generally perceived that Croydon's libraries are providing something locally **for people who can't afford or access things any other way**, whether that is books, workspace, community space, socialising opportunities, warm spaces or safety.

3.18   We heard frequently in our conversations that there are **growing requirements** for more **translation, ESOL** and **refugee/asylum seeker support**.

3.19   There is also understood to be **growing demand** in Croydon in relation to **health support requirements (both physical and mental) and** increasing interest in **environmental or climate change activities**.

3.20   Several officers felt that **the Council's**, not just the library service's, **workforce** may need '**upskilling**' to respond to these changing local needs. It was implied in our conversations that the 'traditional' librarian's role has changed significantly.

What needs are not being met and how could they be?

3.21   We heard a wide range of suggestions and ideas about the perceived needs of Croydon residents that are currently not being met in full by the existing library service offer,

3.22   These included:

- **London Borough of Culture-related arts and creativity:** including digital creativity: some questions raised about how libraries should complement this.

- **Physical and mental health**: including safe havens for diverse user groups and loneliness; join-ups with local partners and Public Health focused on prevention.

- **Housing**: significant challenges; responding to recent high-profile reports on housing standards and pressures and the need for local transformation.

- **Community spaces**: general perception that there are not enough reasonably priced spaces on offer to the VCS.

- **Translation and ESOL support**: increasing demand locally.

What services operate in the wider landscape which meet some of this need? Is there potential for collaboration and closer alignment?

3.23   We received a number of suggestions about services operating in the wider landscape, offering potential for collaboration and closer alignment including: Resident Contact, Housing Services, Public Health, Community and Voluntary Sector team, Children's Services: especially the Family Hubs programme, Croydon Music and Arts.

4. KLOE b: the quality of Croydon's library network

What people have told us

What's come out of the external briefings

4.1 We were told of the importance of **making the existing spaces more 'vibrant'** to help with their appeal (and marketability for external hire).

4.2 The importance of **toilet accessibility**: we heard a number of times how 'accessible' toilet facilities were important to users, with individual sites requiring 'renovation' and one individual offering a volunteer's services as a professional surveyor in order to help address accessibility challenges – 'it would be good if we could talk with someone about this'. One person gave an anecdotal example where group use at their library has to be regularly 'curtailed' due to the lavatories not being open.

What's come out of the staff workshops

What good looks like

4.3 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.

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

4.5 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.

4.6 *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.

4.7 *Processes*: staff told us of various IT infrastructure and reliability issues, including 'awful' 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.

4.8   *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.

4.9   *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.

4.10   *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.

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

Table E6: 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.
• 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.

What's come out of the officer interviews

4.12   **There have been suggestions made that the current 13-strong library network is** '**excessive'** and should be consolidated with other Council physical assets across Croydon.

4.13   Several officers agree with the principle of the library service operating from **'fewer but better'** physical library buildings, but it is recognised that Croydon has **a significantly larger population relative to other London Boroughs**. Some officers queried how

this should best be reflected in the quantity of physical buildings on offer to residents across the borough.

4.14   We heard loudly that a **'one size fits all' approach will not work** for Croydon's library service. There is a perceived 'loose' divide in Croydon – of the North (perhaps more work/study focused in terms of need) and the South (perhaps more culture-focused in terms of needs) – that could help to inform the future library service offer

4.15   We understand that **the Council has a wider physical assets (or 'disposal') review in progress**, and that the library service's review needs to align with the asset review's drivers. A number of **Croydon regeneration projects and placemaking opportunities** were suggested to us that the library service's transformation could align with. Suggestions we heard included:

- Central Library, the Clock Tower redevelopment and overall masterplan for the area: noting some recognitions of past failed attempts to make this work.

- Croydon 'Campus': future Council ambitions to be explored further.

- East Croydon: considered a location that is 'on the up'.

- Purley redevelopment.

- Regeneration team's 'placemaking' agenda and HRA housing priorities.

- South Norwood Neighbourhood Plan, including ideas for a 10-year redevelopment of the site and surrounding local area.

- Town Centre development, and work with Westfield/Whitgift Shopping Centre.

The condition of the libraries that are in the right place and any changes needed

4.16   There were strong views that **each library should have a 'different',** or locally tailored, **offer**.

4.17   Some were interested in the idea of **reconfiguring the library network** to be '**fewer but better**' and **adjusting the layouts and spaces** inside the physical buildings.

4.18   The libraries that currently exist are generally considered to be **located in the right geographic areas** and that there are **no obvious provision 'deserts'** in Croydon.

Suggestions for targeted capital investment

4.19   We were told that any '**asset transfers'** must be '**viable**', which may include associated '**capital investment'** first.

4.20   Once any asset transfers have been completed, it has been suggested that 'ring-fenced' investment should be made in **the 'retained' and 'rationalised' library network**.

4.21   Suggested areas for investment include:

- **Physical fabric:** including decoration and general modernisation.

- **Physical infrastructure**: including space reconfiguration to enable e.g. new security doors/internal walls to allow for extended chargeable hire of spaces that need separation from other parts of the building.

- **Hardware**: including IT for self-service opening, digital access and activities.

5. KLOE c: the impact of the 2022 changes:

What people have told us

What's come out of the external briefings

5.1 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.

5.2 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**.

5.3 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.

5.4 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'.

5.5 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.

5.6 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.

5.7 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.

5.8   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'.

What's come out of the officer interviews

5.9   It is broadly perceived by officers that the Council '**didn't do a great job**' by implementing part-time opening across its library network.

5.10   Officers understand that the Council's political leadership are **committed to providing a 'good library' offer** in Croydon.

5.11   Officers recognised that societal, and public sector, moves towards increased use of IT and online services means it is **timely to review, and potentially adjust, the library service's online offer** as part of its transformation and any revised whole service offer.

5.12   The library transformation project is understood to operate in a highly challenging financial context, as well as carry **significant local consultation history** for all officers to be mindful of. Officers expect the outcomes of the library transformation project to help contribute towards the challenges that the whole Council faces.

5.13   Officers recognise that the previous library transformation projects **did not achieve a satisfactory outcome** for either Croydon residents or the Council.

5.14   In response to the above, and within this strategic future planning context, we heard how all transformation projects, including the library service, are encouraged to be **'aspirational, but pragmatic'**.

5.15   From our conversations, it is clear that library service staff, and senior Council officers, are **keen for the library service offer to change**. However, past resourcing and staff turnover issues have meant it has been difficult to do successfully. We heard at least one reference to **'ridiculous' timetables for transformation,** affecting the Council's ability to be thorough with exploring all possible opportunities and ideas for services.

5.16   One person suggested to us that there was a new service offer '**balance**' to be struck between '**how many / distance**' and '**hours / access**'.

5.17   Another person advised that the library service's **traditional 'physical' presence** was highly valued by residents and shouldn't go.

6. KLOE d: making more efficient use of assets

What people have told us

What's come out of the external briefings

6.1 People were keen to **make more use of underused spaces**. Several people, on behalf of their groups, told us about their 'ideas for delivering from (*underused spaces*)' in library buildings.

6.2 One person told us 'we want to work with you – we have local groups who want to use it' (with reference to one particular space); another mentioned 'as a VCS organisation, we're always looking for spaces – there's a bit of a match there'. We also heard how the extra **income** from hiring these underused spaces (albeit with improvements) could be a way to 'free up money for (*more*) staff'.

6.3 During one briefing, a number of people highlighted the **accessibility** and **transport challenges** facing residents, recognising that whilst the option of going to 'other (*library building*) locations' was available to people in Croydon, this was 'not easy if (*you were*) not a car driver'.

6.4 Many people reflected on a need for physical fabric improvements to Croydon's library buildings – one person said that **the 'right initiative and investment (*was needed*)** to make the most of libraries'.

6.5 Every briefing group expressed **concerns and local perceptions of the possibility that some library buildings might be 'sold off'**. One person felt the Council would solve a 'short term problem' but create 'a longer-term issue' by doing this, with another telling us that 'once you've closed the library, it's gone forever'.

6.6 One person told us they found the idea of a library 'building being sold' in order to help save the service, or Council, money was 'unsettling'. Another individual also shared a strong belief that 'community run libraries just won't work'.

What's come out of the officer interviews

6.7 We received a number of suggestions for **services, groups and organisations**, that the library service **could co-locate, partner or integrate more closely with**, including:

- Family Hubs.

- Asian Resource Centre.

- South Norwood, working with the Friends Groups.

- CALAT.

- Housing/Resident Contact: with significant caveats about the safe division of spaces for users with violent/challenging behaviours and e.g. family and children's activities.

- Public Health: building on existing relationship and funding opportunities.

- Neighbouring London boroughs: exploring a perception that some residents 'boundary hop' to use library, and other public, services.

6.8   However, we were told that if co-location and deeper integration is going to happen and be successful, **the Council must learn the lessons** of previous projects' '**ridiculous timetables'** and not rush the **relationship building**, and **preparatory work with services**, that would first be required.

The effect and performance of self-service access and the lessons learned

6.9   Despite best intentions, there is an officer perception that the self-service opening (SSO) implementation **could have gone better**. We understand that, whilst initial teething issues have been worked through, there remains **some resident** '**confusion'** about how it all works.

6.10   Several people told us that **the underlying issue** remains - that **library opening hours are not what residents want them to be** - and that this needs to be reviewed.

The site footprint of other public and voluntary services in the area of each library

6.11   Several people described perceptions **of a 'generous' Council that had helped prop up financially struggling sites**, meaning there was a 'proliferation' of physical assets across the borough that had **not been strategically deployed or maintained**.

6.12   We also heard how the Council's physical assets may have been **handily located to meet the past needs** of Croydon residents. It was suggested that, as the borough's needs are likely to have changed in recent years, some of **these locations may no longer be as useful as they used to be**, so **'hard truths' may now be required** about their **sustainability** and **value for money**.

7. KLOE e: learning from elsewhere

What people have told us

What's come out of the external briefings

Suggestions about what can be done

7.1 Several people suggested there were **local 'successes' that could be 'built on'**, flagging the work of 'the Brutalist Library campaign', and that 'Upper Norwood and West Norwood' in particular had been 'fabulous and innovative'.

7.2 One person suggested **more could be learnt by working closely with Croydon's voluntary sector**, noting that 'there was a bit of a match' in terms of offering available space at a reasonable price to local charitable organisations and groups in need.

The most important issues that the Council should take into account

7.3 Exploring the **income generation possibilities** was mentioned at one discussion, with one person suggesting the service could improve its **'entrepreneurial approach**… (*the Council should*) **explore up and down the country and learn** from that'

7.4 One individual suggested it might be beneficial for the library service to **speak with other related interest groups and VCS organisations about 'priorities and inwards investment'**, pointing to the example of a recent significant ACE grant award to Croydon and highlighting that the service, with others, 'could do partnership bids to seek funding'.

What's come out of the officer interviews

7.5 Our interviewees recognised that there was **no shortage of ideas** regarding the potential for the library service to do more, and enable more, using new and additional IT. However, it was generally recognised that to venture into this area **would require capital investment in equipment and workforce development** in order to do it well and 'get ahead of the curve'.

7.6 We received a suggestion to build on the technology work that South Bank University are currently doing, working in close partnership with Croydon's Public Health team.

7.7 There was a **general awareness of**, and a range of officer viewpoints on other library and related services for Croydon to learn lessons from, including: Havering, Hammersmith & Fulham, Brent, Coventry – Carnegie specifically, sector insights gained from working with APPG (via Croydon Public Health).

7.8 There were also some individual perceptions of **how 'not to'** approach this concept, based on approaches that have gone badly in Croydon previously. The abortive Norwood Junction site was cited as an example by one officer.

Services that have engaged volunteers and communities in library service delivery

7.9   Several officers indicated volunteer involvement was **an interesting concept** and shared their awareness of the approach taken by other services that Croydon could aspire to. If this idea was to be explored further, Wigan Deal and Brent were suggested as case studies.

8. KLOE f: how people feel about potential changes to their libraries in the future

What people have told us

What's come out of the external briefings

8.1 A few people also recognised **the hard reality of the financial challenges** that the Council was facing. Two people described how it was 'better going to part-time than closing', and 'better to have one day a week, than not'. Another individual stated that it was important for 'all of us to bear in mind… there is no more, but no less, money. We're having to be really hard-nosed here and how do we do this'.

8.2 The majority consensus at our discussions was that there had been **no significant change in peoples' views on the original three options consulted on in 2021**. Comments included 'No… (*there's*) not enough people there'; ''Not really… My view has not changed'; and 'Basically, no change'. Three people described how 'from memory, none of the four options felt good to us'; that the 'blanket approach didn't feel good enough', and that 'it sounded like running staff into the ground'.

8.3 There was a clear general feeling expressed during the briefings - as summarised by one individual – that **residents 'would have liked things to stay as they were, but (*that*) wasn't an option'**. One person told us that 'we need to keep investing in local libraries', with another individual feeling that Croydon's library service had been 'cut to the bone'.

8.4 On the whole, we observed that people felt the outcome of the changes had been unsatisfactory, and it was important that the Council '**consulted more widely' to look 'thoroughly' at what else could be done.** There was general agreement by the groups that closing libraries was not 'a viable option'.

What's come out of the officer interviews

8.5 It has been suggested that the **urgency** of the Council's financial position needs conveying to local residents with total **transparency** to help them understand the difficult choices that need to be considered (again). We were also told that a '**long term / gradual change'** and '**reimagining** and **transformation'** approach would be needed.

8.6 It is clear **there is a community of passionate local groups and campaigners with a long history of engagement with the Council** during Croydon's library service transformation. We have heard that it will be important to stay closely engaged with these groups, and to engage with their concerns sensitively, informed by the lessons and feedback of past consultations.

8.7 Given the difficult financial situation Croydon faces, in more than one discussion, we heard it was essential the Council was now **frank about money** with residents and **did not 'fudge' difficult financial decisions** as it was perceived to have done in the past.

9. KLOE g: the scope for more voluntary and community involvement

What people have told us

What's come out of the external briefings

9.1 A handful of people raised **security concerns in relation to volunteers having access to library members' personal data**. One person said they 'don't like idea of volunteers having access to my data ', with another asking, 'are they (*volunteers*) DBS checked?'.

9.2 We received a couple of queries about **the level of training that volunteers receive**. One person told us 'They (*volunteers*) don't' replace staff'.

9.3 During the discussions, several people raised their **frustrations** at community groups being **unable to access to use library spaces for themselves on building 'closed days'**.

9.4 Several people told us about **a lack of confidence in, and a strong aversion to, the concept of community run libraries**. Comments we received included:

- 'Community run (*libraries*) is a disaster waiting to happen'.

- '(*I*) don't think local community libraries can rely and run on volunteers'.

- 'My perspective on volunteer run libraries has hardened'.

- ''Just don't think it would work in Croydon - has it worked anywhere else?'.

9.5 We heard that some people from community group backgrounds had also found **the current process of applying to become a library volunteer quite difficult.** One person told us they had heard anecdotally how 'people who wanted to get involved as volunteers (*had*) found the process quite difficult', recommending to the Council that 'if you want volunteers, you need to make sure the process is straightforward''

9.6 Several people said that the Council could **make it easier for 'people (*to*) understand how they can get involved** in the service'.

9.7 We heard during one discussion a handful of examples of **the cafe spaces** located in different Croydon library buildings that were **perceived to have commercial potential** and 'available for use', however '**no one was running them**'.

9.8 The Council were encouraged a handful of times to **'explore how volunteers can help'** the service. One person said that the Council needed to **'trust (*the*) groups'**, with another mentioning exploring 'what activities people (*could*) run themselves'.

9.9   People in the groups also stated that the use of volunteers needed proper resourcing and support to recruit and retain people and make it work and that the Council should factor this into any plans to develop the role of volunteering in the library service.

What's come out of the officer interviews

9.10   We heard loudly in our conversations that as there had recently been big cuts to the funding for the local VCS, there are **likely to be some tensions and ill feelings** in the sector's relationship with the Council.

9.11   Several officers recognised volunteers as a route to offer extra '**capacity'**.

9.12   There were perceptions that **the capacity and skill** levels of local VCS organisations **varies greatly** - from those who are functioning well, through to those who struggle despite their best intentions.

9.13   We were told clearly that the local VCS is **generally struggling for resources**. One person described how some have been forced to 'give up buildings' due to rising costs and recently reduced funding.

9.14   One person described how there had been **a number of past 'credible proposals'** from local VCS and faith groups who were interested in taking over certain sites for the Council that might now warrant revisiting.

9.15   It was suggested to us that some VCS groups **may have the skills and connections in order to be able to develop certain sites commercially** (i.e. generate a commercial income from their use/hire of space, or subletting), which the Council could/should then see a commercial return from.

9.16   It was indicated to us that it would be **timely to re-explore** this whole topic. It was suggested that **a dedicated coordinator** would be required to make any CAT opportunities happen in reality.

9.17   Suggestions were shared for '**enabling' buildings for more usage** - e.g. Sunday opening. It was recognised that some sites **would require physical infrastructure works** and capital investment to overcome these existing 'barriers' (e.g. introducing new walls and doors to block off parts of the library building) and the development of new key holder responsibilities and policies for non-library staff. There would also be significant associated culture shift and changes to operational ways of working in order to make this happen.

10. Next steps

10.1   The main report recommends in-depth public consultation and engagement over the proposed changes to the service.

10.2   The data from the last two rounds of public consultation in 2021 and feedback from the external briefings and staff workshop and interviews in recent months will inform the design of the public consultation in the next phase of this review.

Annex 1 to Appendix E – List of organisations we have spoken with

Table E7: list of external organisations spoken with

Job title and organisation
The Hive (Coulsdon Library garden)
Brutalist Library Group (South Norwood)
Save Croydon Libraries Campaign
Norbury Green Residents Association
Purley Panel
Love Norbury
Spring Parks Residents Association
Coulsdon Church of England School
Friends of South Norwood Library
Asian Resource Centre of Croydon (ARCC)
Friends of Sanderstead/Residents Association
Spring Park Residents Association (Shirley Library)
The Library Campaign
Purley Baptist Church