

# **Executive Summary: Options appraisal for the future of the library service**

## **London Borough of Croydon**

Report from RedQuadrant



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## Executive Summary

This report is designed to provide a range of options that Croydon Council can consider as you work to develop a modern, relevant and effective library service, within a national and local context of decreasing local authority budgets. It draws on four reports that we produced in the earlier stages of our investigation (attached as appendices):

- The results of the early engagement exercise with public, staff and stakeholders;
- An analysis of current performance and need;
- A review of assets; and
- A best practise review

This report brings the findings together to propose possible routes forward for the library service as you seek to improve the current service. We have drawn together options that could improve the current service (working within current budgets) as well as options that would deliver savings should these be required at a future point.

## Background

Croydon Library service operates thirteen libraries within the borough attracting almost two million visits a year. From 2012 until January of this year, delivery of the service was outsourced to Carillion plc. Following the latter's collapse, Croydon Council immediately took the service back in house. Whilst this change was undertaken as an emergency measure, to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of the service to the public, it is now an appropriate time for Croydon to review the possible options for delivering its library service.

Local authority finances are under ongoing pressure everywhere, including in Croydon, and libraries are not exempt from those pressures. It is therefore timely to assess a broad range of options now, including some that could potentially deliver savings, not only to identify ways to improve the current service but also to be prepared to adapt to future financial pressures.

The council is developing its new operating model with a focus on prevention. Libraries are well placed to deliver prevention activities in areas of education, health and wellbeing, communities, digital, routes to work, support for aging residents and more. To fully realise libraries' potential in these areas within the local government financial context, you will need to assess your priorities for the service and may need to reduce expenditure in some areas in order to invest in new.

## Modern public libraries

Public libraries are widely valued, even by people who do not currently use them. Most people see libraries as an important community service. The research suggests that public libraries are valued because: they are trusted; they are one of the few public services that people often think of as 'theirs'; and they are widely perceived to be important for groups

such as children, older people and people on low incomes. Further, libraries are seen as a social leveller, with an ability to bring people together.

The most successful modern libraries are those that understand their role as part of the wider council vision and, working where necessary with partners, deliver a range of opportunities that respond effectively and efficiently to the needs of their local community.

To do this they:

- Recognise the ongoing importance of traditional library services but also the key importance of digital enablement;
- Use the latest technology to support service delivery and increase access to services;
- Add value through links between libraries and other policy areas such as culture, health and wellbeing, business and economic growth;
- Build the skills needed to help the library workforce deliver these priorities and to take on new roles as part of wider service provision; and
- Communicate the value of libraries, highlighting innovation and good ideas

While the core functions of libraries are seen by most people to be the lending of books and providing access to reference materials, there has been a recent surge of innovation (or rediscovery of old ideas) over the last 10 to 15 years. These changes have been motivated by drivers such as declining book lending, budget reductions, or new ideas about the role of libraries in society and in the digital age.

As local government service delivery models evolve, aided by the dawn of the digital age, libraries present new opportunities to serve a wider purpose and address broader social, cultural and economic outcomes for local authorities.

Local government finances have been under unprecedented pressure in the last ten years and despite being a statutory service, libraries are not exempt from this pressure. As a statutory function, the council has a duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service, but the approach to meeting the financial challenge in respect of libraries has varied considerably across the country. Whilst some areas have seen a reduction in the number and quality of libraries, more imaginative approaches have emerged elsewhere. Closer working with the community, more partnerships, effective use of volunteers and more efficient use of assets are all key elements to preserving the value of libraries in an era of reduced resources.

### How your libraries are used

We have analysed the current patterns of usage in your libraries and compared them to other outer London boroughs. We found that:

- Croydon libraries are comparatively well used when compared to outer London in general, with above average visits per capita. The pattern of usage is more akin to inner

city areas, with less borrowing per customer but more PC usage, and other types of usage likely to be higher.

- More than half of your library use is at Croydon Central library. Three other libraries - Ashburton, Selsdon and Thornton Heath had more than one hundred thousand visits in 2017/18. At the other end of the scale, Sanderstead library only had thirty six thousand visits.
- In 2017/18, Croydon spent less on its library service for a borough of its size than the majority of authorities in outer London. This is reflected in lower than average staffing levels, stock budgets and most other library costs. However, it is now apparent that the external contract for library service delivery was priced at well below the market rate and may not have covered the direct costs of the service.
- Overall, Croydon is a very efficient service when judged by cost per visit, which derives from an ability to attract customers despite low levels of investment, and from high staff productivity. However, it should be noted that there is likely to be a law of diminishing returns on library investment: a more basic library service can be delivered at a relatively low cost, but providing additional services is likely to cost more. This rule does not, however, apply if a greater range of services is provided through the means of partnership or co-location.

### Customer need

Libraries are a universal service – that is they are provided for all who live, work or study in the area. However, the needs of different parts of the community, whether considered by demographic or socio-economic characteristics, vary with geography. In particular, people who are more economically disadvantaged may have high needs for the services that libraries provide. There are strong links between deprivation and poor health, and often with a lack of educational qualifications. The majority of social deprivation in Croydon is in the north western part of the borough, although there are pockets of high deprivation elsewhere.

Unlike the national picture, there is no exact correlation between library usage and deprivation within Croydon, but some of the wards with the highest deprivation are also those with the highest library use. This is a factor that needs to be considered when developing your library strategy, but as a universal service, libraries should not be targeted at only the deprived areas; people from all backgrounds should be able to enjoy libraries and some of the more affluent areas of the borough have high levels of library use.

We analysed current patterns of library usage amongst different groups of people. We were able to analyse users by age, gender and their borrowing patterns. Just over 15% of Croydon's residents are active users of the library service; of these, over half do not borrow books but use computers or Wi-Fi at in the libraries. There is considerable variation between the proportions of the population using libraries in different parts of the borough.

In common with most public library services, active users account for a greater proportion of the population at large when they are children; children also borrow proportionately

more books than adults. The age group least likely to use libraries is the 15-59 range; this group is also the least likely to borrow.

Amongst children and the over 60s, a greater proportion of the population use libraries if they live close to a library, but this is not the case with working age people. Older people from deprived areas are less likely to use a library, even if there is one locally.

In common with most public library services, more women than men use libraries as a whole, but less so at Croydon Central, New Addington, South Norwood and Thornton Heath libraries. Men are less likely to borrow than women. Men are more likely to use libraries if they live in areas where unemployment and deprivation are high.

Full data is not held by the library service on the ethnicity of its members and this makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions. However, from the data that is held, it appears that Asian and Black people are well represented in the service and that White British people are not, and that Black people are less likely to borrow but more likely to use a computer when using a library.

### Customer demand

We carried out a light touch engagement during February and March this year to find out what people wanted from their library service. The great majority of respondents were current library users. The key themes that emerged were:

- More events and activities, cultural and social, in libraries for all age groups;
- Attractive buildings;
- Better and newer stock;
- Support with getting online;
- Help with getting employment or starting a business;
- Longer opening hours;
- Cafés; and
- Better homework help

### Options for governance

It is now becoming standard practice for local authorities, when considering strategic options for cost savings, to look at alternative governance. Whilst we understand that you have committed to keeping the library service in house at this point in time, we have provided options for governance for completeness.

There are four main sourcing options open to local authorities:

Make	Buy	Share	Divest
In-house transformation	Outsourcing to private sector	Shared services	Transfer to Community
Continuous improvement	Outsource to third Sector	Shared management	Spin-out to mutual or trust
Arm's length trading company	Private-sector joint ventures	Public sector joint ventures	Devolve to district or Parish
			Closure

Each of these sourcing options has advantages and disadvantages. Options other than in-house transformation require considerable preparation and in some cases investment. It is important that the future shape of the service should be defined before considering buying, sharing or divesting – this is so that contractual arrangements are fit for purpose from the outset and contracts are not subject to major revisions early in the process resulting from change in patterns of delivery. Should you consider making significant changes to your library offer (for example, revising your opening hours or closing branches) or workforce, we recommend that you should carry out these changes whilst the service is still in house, although you may then want to review the governance of your service.

Consortium working is a means of achieving efficiencies through joint purchasing arrangements which is independent of governance status – in-house, outsourced or shared services can all participate in consortia. Consortia typically purchase library stock and/or IT systems. The London Libraries Consortium consists of almost half of the library authorities in the capital and may be appropriate for Croydon if a change in your library management system is contemplated.

### Asset review: your existing libraries

We undertook a review of the existing libraries and the council's community based corporate estate.

We examined each of Croydon's libraries and evaluated their potential against three criteria:

- Is the library well located to serve its community, or would it benefit from a new location?
- Are the current facilities at the library appropriate to meet the needs of the local community, or would the library need additional space or facilities? What immediate or long-term improvements could be made to the library to facilitate better customer experience, more economical working and better use of space?

- Are there opportunities for the library to work with other statutory, third sector or business organisations, either through the sharing of space or the release of some space?

The findings of this evaluation are summarised below, including recommendations for the exploration of some opportunities to relocate where the current location is not ideal:

### Ashburton

The library is located near the intersection of two main roads, and at a short distance from the Lower Addiscombe Road shopping area. 26% of households in Ashburton ward had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is free parking within a short distance of the library. Public transport is good with easy access to both tram and bus routes. We believe it is of an appropriate size for its community. A large (currently unused) room at the rear of the library could provide an opportunity to offer additional services in partnership (through space sharing or colocation). Minor improvements to the building are required.

### Bradmore Green

The library is located at a short distance from Marlpit Lane, but at some distance from the local rank of shops. Only 16% of households in Coulsdon East ward had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is free parking around the library with some reserved parking. There is a good bus service from Coulsdon. A wide area is within 30 minutes travel time by public transport. However, much of this area is also accessible to Coulsdon library with similar journey times, the exception being the Old Coulsdon area. We believe that the current building is of appropriate size for the community it serves. Minor building improvements are required. There is little opportunity for space sharing or colocation within the current building. The site has a large footprint but may not be in the best location for any extension or redevelopment.

### Broad Green

The library is located on Canterbury Road, at some distance from major roads or shops. 43% of households in Broad Green and West Thornton wards had no access to a vehicle in 2011. Due to good bus services in Mitcham Road and Purley Way, the library is relatively accessible by public transport. A wide area is within 30 minutes travel time by public transport. There is limited parking around the library, and this is of particular concern for customers with mobility issues. The single space design of the building is not suitable for the many activities and events provided at the library, which would be better served if there were separate meeting rooms.

Moving the library from its present location would risk isolating the current users, many of whom live very close to the current location. It could be possible to replace it on the current site, giving a potential to integrate with a community and children's centre and to provide commercial/community space and staff touchdown points.

## Coulsdon

The library is well located in the shopping district of Coulsdon. Only 13% of households in Coulsdon West ward had no access to a vehicle in 2011, the lowest for any library catchment area. There is parking around the library, but it is subject to restrictions. The library is well served by public transport. A wide area is within 30 minutes travel time by public transport. It might be possible to relocate, and this is worth considering if significant benefits would arise from colocation. Minor improvements are required to the current building, and there is the opportunity to extend it to facilitate colocation or staff touchdown points. It may also be feasible to redevelop the site to incorporate a modern library facility and housing, given the prime high street location.

## Croydon Central

The library is well located close to the central shopping area of Croydon. 42% of households in Fairfield, Wadham, Croham and Addiscombe wards had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is plenty of parking around the library, but it is subject to restrictions and charges. The library is exceptionally well served by public transport by trams, buses and trains. Much of the borough is within 30 minutes travel time by public transport.

The internal arrangement would benefit from review – there is an opportunity to use less space but more efficiently whilst retaining study space and public computers. We understand that integration with the museum and gallery is being considered.

## New Addington

The library is located at the end of the New Addington shopping precinct. 39% of households in New Addington and Fieldway wards had no access to a vehicle in 2011, lower than other deprived areas presumably due to relatively poor transport links. There is parking around the library, but it is subject to restrictions. New Addington is connected to Croydon by tram and there are frequent buses, but public transport times are greater than for other libraries and only the immediate vicinity and some of the Selsdon area can be reached in 30 minutes. Minor improvements to the current building are required. There is an opportunity to work more closely with CALAT in the current location. It may be possible to relocate this library and it would be worth doing so if significant benefits could be derived from colocation. We understand there is a longer-term proposal being considered to locate the library in a purpose built centre collocated with health services and adult education, closer to the leisure centre.

## Norbury

The library is located on the London Road about 650m south of the station, and with few shops in the immediate vicinity. 34% of households in Norbury ward had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is free parking around the library. The library is well served by public transport. A wide area is within 30 minutes travel time by public transport.

Situating the library in the area closer to Norbury station would be likely to generate more footfall. However, we have not located an alternative site, so this may not be possible. In the current library building, there are opportunities to reconfigure the ground floor, and to



release at least half the building space. If that were done there would be considerable opportunities for colocation and for staff touchdown points.

### Purley

The library is located on Banstead Road at some distance from the district shopping area. The area is isolated from much of the shopping area and from the large Tesco superstore because the A23 effectively creates a large traffic island. Banstead Road in any case has few local facilities and the area feels isolated from the thriving town centre. 20% of households in Purley and Kenley wards had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is parking near the library, but some of it is charged for. The library is well served by public transport being on the A23 axis. A wide area is within 30 minutes travel time by public transport.

There could be an opportunity to move elsewhere. Within the current building there is the opportunity to rearrange, releasing space for potential space sharing and colocation, and a need to make minor improvements to the building.

### Sanderstead

The library is located on Sanderstead Hill in an area where there are almost no community facilities or shops. Only 12% of households in Sanderstead ward had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is abundant free parking near the library, and the library is well served by frequent buses. We recommend exploring opportunities to relocate elsewhere. Some improvement is required to the layout of the existing building. If this is done some space could be released, creating a possible opportunity for colocation.

### Selsdon

The library is located as part of the Sainsburys supermarket complex and at a short distance from the shopping area. Only 14% of households in Selsdon and Heathfield wards had no access to a vehicle in 2011. The adjacent supermarket car park is free for up to two hours. The library is well served by frequent buses. A wide area is within 30 minutes travel time by public transport.

There is an opportunity for improvements to the layout. The limited space precludes colocation but there should be the opportunity to work better with partners in the building.

### Shirley

The library is located at the end of the Shirley shopping area. 22% of households in Shirley ward had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is free parking within a short distance of the library. The library is well served by frequent buses along the A232. The library is not ideally located to serve the needs of more deprived communities locally. Given the age, layout and condition of the current building we recommend carrying out feasibility of redevelopment on the current site and/or relocation/colocation in order to achieve greater accessibility for more deprived communities in the local area. There are opportunities to consider relocation. If remaining in the current building there is an opportunity to rearrange and perhaps to release space.

## South Norwood

This library is to be relocated in 2019 to a purpose-built facility. You will need to ensure a flexible, modern design aligned to community priorities to derive the most benefit from this relocation/development.

## Thornton Heath

Thornton Heath library is located on Brigstock Road about 500m from the commercial centre of Thornton Heath. 39% of households in Thornton Heath, Bensham Manor and Upper Norwood wards had no access to a vehicle in 2011. There is free parking within a short distance of the library, but it is often difficult to find a parking space. The area is well served by buses. The location is not ideal, but it is not feasible to relocate. We recommend investigating opportunities to extend or rearrange the current building, and for colocation.

### Best practise: what works elsewhere

In section 8 of the report, we look at what happens in other authorities and cite some examples of good practise that we think are particularly pertinent to Croydon:

- Libraries at the centre of culture;
- Community and council hubs;
- Libraries delivering on health;
- Combatting social isolation;
- Digital inclusion; and
- Libraries as learning centres

## Strategy and how to get there

Our suggested strategic themes for the service are set out in the table below:

Library services based on community need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Evidence based planning</li><li>• Continuous engagement</li><li>• Different solutions for different communities</li><li>• Buildings and services where they are needed</li></ul>
Libraries at the heart of culture in Croydon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Libraries as cultural venues</li><li>• Leading the literature and spoken word offer</li><li>• A strategic approach to cultural programming</li></ul>
Sustainable, relevant services through partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Closer working with council, other organisations and the community</li><li>• Libraries as enablers rather than delivering</li><li>• Partnerships that bring opportunities for Croydon people</li></ul>

## Options for library provision

We recognise that councils are under increasing financial pressure and libraries are no different. In section 10 we present a range of options that could provide improvements to the current service at no extra cost, and/or address the need to reduce library service spend in the future if required. These include:

- Changes to staffing levels;
- Adjusting the hours of the libraries to suit current business levels;
- Making better use of volunteers across the service;
- Closing some libraries; and
- Relocating, redeveloping or reconfiguring libraries to better serve their communities

## A new model of delivery

When looking at library usage we have established that:

- Croydon Central library attracts people from across the borough and beyond;
- Selsdon and Thornton Heath libraries attract people from beyond their catchment area; and
- Other branches are used mainly by local people

We therefore propose that a new approach should be adopted to library delivery in Croydon, ranking libraries as either area hubs, branch libraries or local libraries.

**The main hub** is the central library, serving the entire borough. This library will provide a comprehensive range of stock, including specialist collections. Study space and public computers will continue to be a key element of library provision. There is a full range of partnerships to deliver activities and events. Staffing levels will permit an extensive range of staff led activities. Croydon Central is within 30 minutes' transport time for most of the borough.

**The area hub libraries** would be Thornton Heath and Selsdon, serving the north and south of the borough respectively. Book stock will be at a lower level than at the Central library. There is a full range of partnerships to deliver activities and events. Staffing levels will permit a range of staff led activities. Thornton Heath library is within 30 minutes travelling time of most of the north of the borough. Selsdon is easily accessible by public transport from much of the east of the borough including New Addington.

**Branch** libraries are Ashburton, Coulsdon, New Addington, Norbury, Purley and South Norwood libraries serving district centres within the borough. These are essential local libraries serving their communities but where partnership activities can take place.

**Local** libraries are Bradmore Green, Broad Green, Sanderstead and Shirley libraries, generally serving local areas within the borough. These will provide a basic library function and in some of our options are suitable for partial or full operation by volunteers. Broad Green is located in an area of significant deprivation, but more people living in the immediate area of the library use other libraries, especially Croydon Central.

#### **Options for consideration:**

Currently all libraries are open for a similar number of hours and on either 5 or 6 days. However, opening patterns do not align to usage patterns. For example we have observed queues of customers waiting to access Central Library at opening time whilst some smaller libraries receive minimal visits throughout the middle of the day. The council has a range of options that can be considered, either in order to reduce library service expenditure should this be a future requirement or to realign current library resources and expenditure to better meet service demand.

The tables below set out the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed options:

<b>Option 1: Make changes to staffing levels whilst maintaining the current library service</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current service maintained</li> <li>• Easy to implement</li> <li>• Ensures flexibility across the service</li> <li>• Self-service installation brings greater efficiency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not address imbalances in opening hours or service provision</li> </ul>

<b>Option 2: Change library opening hours to reflect usage patterns</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All libraries retained and staffed</li> <li>• Offer better matched to customer demand so that the busiest libraries have the greatest hours</li> <li>• Easy to implement</li> <li>• Increased hours at hub libraries and Ashburton</li> <li>• Increased late opening hours at three libraries</li> <li>• Reduction in opening hours at some libraries could be offset by Open + technology</li> <li>• Some deprived areas would see increases in opening hours – around Thornton Heath and South Norwood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some libraries still poorly located</li> <li>• At local libraries, staffing levels would permit only the operation of a basic library service with few activities delivered by staff, although this could be supplemented by partnerships and volunteers</li> <li>• Some deprived areas would see reductions in opening hours – but at New Addington a reduction could be offset by new technology and better cross service working, the Shrublands area is within reasonable travelling time of Ashburton library with enhanced hours and the Tollers Lane area is within reasonable travelling time of Coulsdon library</li> </ul>

<b>Option 3: Make extensive use of volunteers</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All libraries retained</li> <li>• Offer better matched to customer demand so that the busiest libraries have the greatest hours</li> <li>• Extended hours in the evening</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longer lead in time to forge links with local volunteering organisations and to train volunteers</li> <li>• Recruiting sufficient volunteers may be difficult and volunteers can be less reliable than paid staff</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased late hours at five libraries, including opening to 8pm at three libraries</li> <li>• Some deprived areas would see increases in opening hours – around Thornton Heath and South Norwood</li> <li>• Provides a service at a time appropriate for working people</li> <li>• Option 3B would generate £67K savings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for large reductions in hours at local libraries although this could be offset by Open + technology</li> <li>• Option 3A would cost £9.1K more than the current budget</li> </ul>
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<b>Option 4A: achieve savings by closing libraries</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximises savings</li> <li>• Capital receipt from sites of closed libraries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction of service to residents without enhancement elsewhere</li> <li>• Adverse public reaction</li> <li>• Possible challenge from DCMS and/or through Judicial Review</li> <li>• Some deprived areas left at greater distance from a library</li> </ul>
<b>Option 4B: close libraries and invest</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentrates services at busiest libraries</li> <li>• Considerable uplift in service at five libraries</li> <li>• More staff at Central and hub libraries to provide more customer support and activities</li> <li>• Capital receipt from sites of closed libraries</li> <li>• Tollers lane area served by an enhanced Coulsdon library with good public transport links</li> <li>• Shrublands area served by an enhanced Ashburton library with reasonable public transport links</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some areas are further from a library, particularly Hamsey Green</li> <li>• Adverse public reaction in affected areas</li> <li>• Possible challenge from DCMS and/or through Judicial Review</li> <li>• Some deprived areas left at greater distance from a library</li> </ul>

**Option 5: Relocating, redeveloping and reconfiguring libraries to better serve their communities**

**Relocating**

**Strengths<sup>1</sup>**

- Potential to achieve a more even distribution of libraries
- Opportunities to serve deprived communities more effectively
- Can focus on areas of higher population density
- Potential to reduce travel distances for some residents
- Can create more colocation and partnership opportunities
- Opportunity to target provision at areas of known population growth, thus anticipating future demand
- Opportunity to serve a wider catchment area
- Able potentially to attract more customers, especially of working age, if Open + is installed at new site

**Weaknesses**

- Moving closer to some communities can mean moving further from others – need to ensure those with mobility challenges, e.g. older residents, are not adversely affected
- Costs involved may not be justified by the benefits, if minimal
- May not be able to realise profit from sale of vacated building or site, or identify alternative use by the council, especially if listed status may mean that an alternative use is more difficult to identify

**Redeveloping and reconfiguring**

**Strengths**

- Ensures library remains at the heart of the community that it serves while offering an improved service
- Can create more colocation and partnership opportunities
- Can use redevelopment as opportunity to offer improved facilities in a deprived area
- By creating more space can offer a wider range of services
- Alternatively surplus space could be rented out to generate income
- Able potentially to attract more customers, especially of working age, if Open + is installed as part of redevelopment

**Weaknesses**

- May be investing in a building that is not in the best possible location, e.g. close to communities, on good public transport
- Need to consider whether changes in population patterns mean that the library is no longer in the best possible location
- Protections such as listed status may inhibit plans to reconfigure

<sup>1</sup> Note that some strengths and weaknesses may be unique to specific libraries so each opportunity needs to be carefully assessed on its own merits

