



Forest Hill Traders Association

FAO Sir Steve Bullock, Mayor, Lewisham Council
Re Library Consultation 2015 – Plans For Forest Hill Library

Dear Mr Bullock,

I am writing on behalf of the Forest Hill Traders Association with regard to the proposed changes to Forest Hill library.

The FHTA has represented the local business community, particularly the retail trade, for many years and has a growing number of active members. Our key stated aims are to promote Forest Hill as a friendly and welcoming place to shop and to increase trade and promote the commercial interests of its members.

Forest Hill library is a strongly supported and well-liked library, and one of the main pillars of the community in Forest Hill. Along with the swimming pool complex it sits at one of Forest Hill's extremities and, along with the pool, is one of the main reasons for footfall on Dartmouth Road. Dartmouth Road contains over fifty retail units, the vast majority of which are small independent businesses, employing local people and generating income for the area. During the period where Forest Hill Pools were closed the footfall on Dartmouth Road was dramatically cut and many of the shop units fell vacant.

Forest Hill library is one of the busiest in Lewisham, drawing people not only for the traditional book-borrowing service, but from the wide array of additional services that are provided by the professional library staff. While there is no doubt that the library has thrived in recent years, we are not confident that some of the formats proposed for the future of the library, particularly the community-run model of operating it on a voluntary basis, will be good news for the library, the surrounding businesses or the people of Forest Hill.

The figures indicate that borrowing from community libraries across Lewisham has fallen dramatically since 2010, and while we do recognise that there is also a small decrease in borrowing at Forest Hill, the fall has been dwarfed by the figures for all the community libraries, and is the lowest decrease of any library in Lewisham. More books are borrowed from Forest Hill library than all of the community libraries in Lewisham put together. While we have no doubt that the volunteers who run these community libraries are doing sterling work and should be applauded, there is no reasonable argument, based on the figures, to say that the lending of books will not suffer greatly if the Forest Hill library is switched to a community model. In a deprived inner city area such as Forest Hill, the council should have the policy of increasing literacy at the top of its agenda, and not be following a path towards undoubted decrease in book circulation.



The ground floor space in the library is almost entirely taken up with book shelves and IT facilities. In order to try and generate income for the library it has been suggested space may be given over to a café, a model that has been successfully pursued in other libraries. However the installation of any such facility would necessitate a reduction in space provided for bookshelves and/or IT. Any café would also be operating in direct competition with the café in the pools, not to mention the café opposite the library and the four other coffee shops and cafes on Dartmouth Road. The library is currently one of the reasons people visit these small businesses, while closing the library would undoubtedly have an adverse effect upon these businesses, setting up in competition with them could be fatal, which could in turn knock on to the footfall for other retailers.

The FHTA does recognise that there is potentially capacity in the upper floors of the library for other uses within the under-utilised rooms. If a model could be introduced that was able to derive an income from these rooms, maintain the existing professional library services, and keep the existing opening hours, then we would happily support any such venture. However this needs to be measured and enforced, and if any new operator can not maintain current levels of service they should be appropriately fined, or the service be taken back under council control.

We do understand the Council has a need to cut costs and that there is an opportunity to reduce outgoings by re-structuring the existing council-run libraries in the borough. However we wish to stress in the strongest possible terms that in our opinion a community library would not be suitable for the Forest Hill, nor would any change of use of the current space on the ground floor into a café, or indeed any other commercial operation.

Thank you for your time and attention in reading this letter, we hope our opinion, and that of so many others in the borough, are listened to and acted upon.

Yours sincerely,

Simon R N Higgs
Executive Officer for the Forest Hill Traders Association