

Forest Hill Society response to Lewisham Library Consultation

I am writing in response to Lewisham Council's proposed changes to library services in the borough, and particularly relating to the changes to services in Forest Hill library.

The Forest Hill Society was formed in 2006 and has around 400 members across SE23 and the surrounding area. Our primary aims are to promote a strong and vibrant high street, a sense of community in the local area, and work to enhance the environment in which our members live and work.

Forest Hill library is a well-used and well-liked library. In terms of book borrowing it is the third busiest library in the borough and visitor numbers have risen by 17% between 2010 and 2014, more than any other Lewisham managed library that was open in 2010. The increase in visitors is accounted for not just from book borrowing, but from the range of other activities that take place in the library, utilising the skills of the professional library staff. We believe that Lewisham should be particularly proud of Forest Hill library, its performance over the last five years, and its place in the community.

However, the proposals for Forest Hill library, in particular the option of conversion to a community library, have the potential to seriously jeopardise the value of the library in the community. Below are details of our concerns and why we believe that Forest Hill Library should remain in Lewisham authority control. Some of these reasons apply equally to the other libraries currently under threat; Manor House and Torridon Road.

Borrowing Figures

The CIPFA's report on Lewisham's library services shows that Lewisham borough is below median levels for book borrowing. This is one of the key areas where libraries in Lewisham are failing to match national levels despite libraries being above average in many other respects.

As an Inner London borough libraries play a vital role in access to books for children, adults learning English as a second language, and adults who may not be able to afford new books of their own. Lewisham borough should be prioritising increasing book lending at libraries to help improve literacy levels across the population in addition to the IT and other skills that libraries are able to provide in our communities.

Since 2010 community libraries in Lewisham have seen a devastating drop in book borrowing, despite increased visitors to these libraries. Based on the number of books issued in October 2010 and October 2014, lending rates have fallen by between 60%-90% in community libraries. We recognise that book lending in libraries has generally decreased across the whole country for a variety of reasons, but these drops in lending are well above average. Forest Hill library has performed best in Lewisham, with a drop of just 6% over the same period, which is the best performance of any library in Lewisham that was open in 2010.

It appears that conversion to community libraries has severely impacted book borrowing rates from these libraries, and we believe that on this evidence such a change of management in other Lewisham libraries will have an even more devastating consequence – more devastating because in Forest Hill alone more books are now borrowed than in all five of the community libraries in Lewisham added together.

If Forest Hill and other libraries were to be converted to community libraries we would wish to see safeguards put in place to ensure that lending books remains a priority for the libraries for the lifetime

of any contract - for example, a Service Level Agreement (SLA) that a certain percentage of floor space is devoted to books for lending, and that lending rates should not fall by more than 5% for more than two consecutive years. If these service levels were not met then the provider should be fined by the council and/or the service brought back into council control. However, having seen the track record of community libraries operating in other parts of Lewisham we doubt that any provider is capable of ensuring book borrowing rates are maintained.

Neither book borrowing rates or floor space are included in the draft SLA made available to potential bidders. The Service Level Agreement must include quantitative measures for the core library functions and include options for the council to take back control if the community library is not delivering on these measures. We would also like to see options in the contract for Lewisham to take back management of these libraries if the climate of cuts were to be reversed by a future government and council. Unlike some of the existing community libraries, there is not likely to be large capital expenditure to maintain the buildings (Forest Hill had major improvement works less than 10 years ago), so there is no need for permanent or long-term asset transfers with no ability to reverse the situation in more prosperous times.

Borrowing rates are the measures where Lewisham libraries are currently under-performing, and community libraries are massively under-performing. Forcing Forest Hill library down the same path, against the wishes of the community, is likely to yield a similar reduction in borrowing in what is today a successful library in this respect.

Space for non-Library Functions

Forest Hill library is Grade 2* listed and was built as a library. There is little spare space on the ground floor that is not already utilised by book shelves and IT facilities. There is little space on, and no disabled access to the first and second floors. For this reason opening up the building for other uses is likely to be seriously limited.

Forest Hill library's location makes it uneconomical to include a café (which have successfully attracted people to Sydenham and Crofton Park community libraries); the swimming pool includes a café, there is another café across the street, and there are at least four more along Dartmouth Road.

We oppose any loss of floor space for books, which have already had to make space for computers in a relatively small library. One of the few complaints that we regularly hear from members is that the library is not well stocked, and any loss of space for books is likely to impact borrowing figures and reduce the visitors to the library wishing to read books.

We hope that the council will recognise that Forest Hill library is slightly different from some of the existing community libraries in that there is little space for outside organisations to run non-lending and profit making activities. Our concern is not for an investor to make a profit, but to be able to earn sufficient income from the building to continue to improve the library as a service to the community, rather than run it down while focusing on other more profitable libraries in the borough.

To help ensure any organisation bidding for management of community libraries has the best interests of each library in mind, we ask that if Lewisham do ask for bids from outside organisations, that each library is dealt with on a case-by-case basis, so that no organisation takes on buildings where they have no interest in delivering the highest possible quality service.

Difficulty in maintaining service levels with volunteers

Forest Hill library is currently open for 66 hours per week. We understand that any service level agreement would maintain this as the minimum opening hours. These hours are longer than any of the existing community libraries and, as has already been stated, more book lending takes place at this library than at the five existing community libraries. To maintain the same level of service as is currently provided will require a very large number of volunteers from the local area. We do not believe that volunteers would be willing to run the library seven days a week for up to eleven hours per day, and there is fear in the community that this would inevitably lead to a reduction in opening hours and the need to rely on volunteers who may not have the level of skills required for managing such a library.

We pay tribute to the fine work done by volunteers in existing community libraries, in some cases with little assistance from the organisation that is meant to be responsible for running the library. We recognise that they have prevented the closure of some of our smaller libraries and successfully diversified the services offered, in some cases after years of under investment by the council.

Although we believe that switching to a volunteer run library is unlikely to be appropriate for Forest Hill, we do support the idea of volunteers assisting in some of the tasks in running a library. We recommend that Lewisham implement such a programme to support staff across all libraries they manage and, if necessary, to supplement services where staff cuts are required. This would be far better implemented by the council in all libraries (including Lewisham, Downham, and Deptford) rather than relying purely on the community library model that has not been successful in maintaining levels of book borrowing and library services. This approach could maintain professional staffing of all remaining libraries and spread the need for volunteers more evenly across the whole of the borough.

We believe there is a sensible balance between professional library services run by the council and support from volunteers in the community and that such an initiative would be the best way to safeguard services and reduce costs. At a minimum we would like the council to run a trial for a few years before committing more library buildings to a 20-25 year lease to an outside organisation.

Hub Libraries

Three proposed hub libraries (Lewisham, Downham, and Deptford) in the north and east of the borough will be of little benefit to residents in the south-west of the borough. Library staff based in these hubs will have difficulty travelling to Forest Hill due to the distance, with Forest Hill being located furthest from any of the hubs.

The proposal to increase opening hours at these hubs will only increase the cost of staff at these sites. While this may be of benefit to these libraries and the communities they serve, it is sad that Forest Hill, Manor House, Torridon Road, and Catford will be losing council library staff to offset these increases in services. In the case of Forest Hill this is particularly unjust since we will be so remote from the nearest hub library. If there are to be cuts to library staffing levels then it seems unfair that some communities will end up with significantly better service provision, while in Lewisham West our services will be sacrificed.

Conclusions

1. We are proud of Forest Hill library; the 17% increase in visitors in the last four years, maintaining book borrowing at 94% of 2010 levels, and all the additional services already provided in the building.
2. We accept that, due to cuts in Local Authority funding, there may need to be a reduction in staffing levels in library services.
3. We believe that using volunteers to support existing Lewisham libraries can be a useful way to reduce the impact of these cuts.
4. We recommend that volunteers should be used across all Lewisham managed libraries rather than only in community libraries.
5. We cannot support an increase in hours for the three remaining 'Hub Libraries' while staffing levels are being reduced in Forest Hill, Manor House, Torrison Road, and Catford.
6. We expect that borrowing figures will plummet in any community library, as has been demonstrated in five separate libraries across Lewisham.
7. We do not accept that the community library model is suitable for larger libraries (with borrowing levels higher than all five community libraries in the borough put together).
8. We do not believe that a community library in Forest Hill would be capable of supporting library services that are financed by other profit-making services in the space, and as a result library services can only deteriorate in the community library model.