

NORTHUMBERLAND HEATH COMMUNITY FORUM



The Northumberland Heath Community Forum response for the Bexley Council's Consultation Draft Strategy and Proposals to Remodel the Library Service 2014

Summary

1. The consultation questionnaire is cleverly framed so as to encourage endorsement of a single strategy: it is a consultation that does not provide clear choice between distinct options for borough ratepayers/voters to decide. The impression given is that the Council has in fact already made up its mind. This hardly befits a Council whose stated mission statement is '*Listening to you, working for you*'. (This lack of consultation clarity is something that the forum has previously noted.)
2. Disentangling the supporting documents and questionnaire, it is clear that the Council's preferred option (the only one explicitly stated in the 'consultation' (*sic*) documentation) is to achieve current austerity-dictated financial savings through reducing the number of Council-managed library branches and increasing the opening hours of the remaining Council managed branches.
3. The obvious null hypothesis option would be to maintain the existing number of branches *but* to achieve savings through decreasing the opening hours of all branches.
4. In other words the two options that might have presented to rate-payers/voters would be to **a**) either decrease the spatial (local) availability of the service but increase temporal (opening time) availability at more distantly spaced branches (the current proposal), or **b**) decrease temporal activity (opening times) but maintain the service's spatial availability (more local distribution).
5. Option '**b**' is arguably the preferred option for the following reasons:-
 - i.* Not all local branch users will travel by bus/car over a mile to a branch if their local branch is closed. Obvious examples include: primary school class visits; local toddler groups; local groups meeting (community, reader, local coffee groups *etc*). This means that with the

current proposals (option 'a') library use will decline irrespective of community need.

- ii.* Reducing the number of Council managed library branches will (unless specific safeguards are openly and blatantly included) be an irreversible move reducing future options. Conversely, adopting option 'b' still leaves the door open to option 'a' in the future if expectations are not met.
 - iii.* Furthermore, option 'b' is fully reversible: having reduced opening times of *all* branches it would be easy (once austerity years have ended) to restore opening hours.
 - iv.* For some wards such as Northumberland Heath, the local library is the *only* Council-owned public building resource ratepayers/voters can use. Option 'a' is therefore detrimental to these rate-payers/voters.
 - v.* Option 'a' runs contrary to Bexley borough's own development plan especially in light of 'iv' above. Conversely option 'b' is in line with meeting Bexley's development strategy (see paragraph 17.v below).
 - vi.* Option 'a' does not further national goals to encourage a knowledge-based economy. An easily accessible, properly resourced council managed library service is more in line with these goals than a less-accessible one in which the number of council-managed libraries is reduced in the impoverished parts of the borough.
 - vii.* Following on from 'vi' above, the current proposals (option 'a') is not progressive. Three of the four branches the Council propose to relinquish management responsibility are in the poorest parts of the borough.
 - viii.* Following from 'vii' above, citing in the consultation's supporting document the success of the formerly Council-managed Bexley Village Library is far from convincing. One would expect any venture (especially an educational/cultural one) to stand a better chance of success in the wealthiest and better educated part of the borough. Conversely, one would expect that such ventures would struggle more in the poorest parts of the borough where the socio-economic challenges are greater.
 - ix.* The Council seems to have already made up its mind (paragraph 1) as the evidence it uses to support its case is cherry-picked. It therefore seems to have closed its mind to evidence-based alternative options such as option 'b' which at the very least deserves diligent consideration.
6. Given that there are multiple, logical and evidence-based arguments for an alternative (option 'b') to the Council's current proposal (option 'a') to achieve austerity savings, the only question that remains is whether or not our Councillors have the desire and will to listen and act?

Response

The consultation questionnaire is misleading

7. The past two decades have seen increasing dissatisfaction with the political class that has perceived to have failed to engage with the electorate as is evidenced by a trend in declining proportion of the electorate exercising their voting rights. Yet there is clearly public support for meaningful engagement as is evidenced by the rise in support of non-traditional parties and large electoral involvement where clear choices are available (for example English woodland management and Scottish independence). Sadly the current Bexley consultation is seriously flawed; indeed, so blatantly that many locally with whom the Forum engage feel that there is no point responding as 'the Council has already made up its mind'.
8. There is not the space here to go into how flawed the consultation is and so we will confine ourselves to just a couple areas of concern. First, the consultation questionnaire's question 1, and second, the consultation's supporting documentation.
9. Question 1 of the Council's Consultation asks whether or not we support the proposal to "Develop and promote six modern libraries which are accessible to all" in the borough. What it does *not* say is that it is also proposed to transfer away from Council ownership four libraries. To ascertain that respondents need to see separate documentation and there is no link to this in the on-line surveymonkey and nor were hard copies of the questionnaire bound and distributed with paper copies of the strategy. The Council might think that this is a satisfactory way of managing consultation; we do not.
10. Second, the consultation's supporting documentation is sadly lacking. It proposes only *one* option: transferring four Council run libraries to private (non-Council) management. There are other money-saving options including reducing opening hours in all library branches including the Central Library. Non-trivial savings can be made in both salaries and overheads (heating, lighting *etc*) by closing *all* branches (including the Central branch) an extra day a week. We refer to this as option '**b**' in the above response summary
11. The documentation is not only lacking in terms of being disingenuous but lacks key detail. There are no budget breakdowns (yet the Council must have this information readily to hand). The on-line documentation has no hyperlinks to greater detail; the use of hyperlinks being a way to make additional detail available to those seeking it without hugely expanding the consultation document. The statistical information provided is incomplete. For example, the statistics provided refer to aggregate footfall and usage while the data for each branch let alone each branch's usage *per unit area* (size) is not given.

12. This last is most germane to the Northumberland Heath branch which is small and so has a respectable level of usage for its size.
 13. Furthermore, the usage data provided in the Council's supporting document only goes back a decade. While this shows that library visits for the borough overall have declined by ~10% (but still over a million a year which is good given the borough's rate-payer population) had it been broken down by branch and gone back two decades then the Northumberland Heath statistics would have shown a marked increase in its branch library usage. This is because the Northumberland Heath branch in the 1990s benefitted from a major relocation and development which resulted in subsequent marked increased usage. This is not reflected in the documentation.
 14. Another instance where the supporting consultation document might be considered misleading is the justification through statement that there is reduced demand for library PC use: actually this is to be welcome as five years ago demand was so heavy that it was common to have to book a PC in advance, today ready access is available though there are still times in most if not all branches where nearly all, if not all, the branches' PCs are in use. This last can be readily verified as PC usage is automatically logged.
 15. Yet another example is that the documentation fails to include the Council's own projections for population change which is of greatest growth in the north of the borough where most of the proposed transfers of Branch management are envisaged. Indeed in Northumberland Heath we have only just seen the near-completion of three (two purpose built and the refurbished Pheasant) new blocks of flats in Belmont Road and there is a proposed new housing estate proposed for the quarry. These will not only bring in new library users but also additional ratepayers to contribute to service costs.
- There are other options to the Councils. For example: Option 'b'*
16. We propose, as one of a number of possible options, what we call option 'b' as an alternative to transferring the Northumberland Heath branch from Council ownership/management. If each branch were open four days a week Monday to Saturday then each branch, including the Central Library, could be closed two days a week with some staff rotating between branches.
 17. Option 'b' is arguably the preferred option over the Council's proposals as they apply to Northumberland Heath for the following reasons:-
 - i. Not all local branch users will travel by bus/car over a mile to a branch if their local branch is closed. Obvious examples include: primary school class visits; local toddler groups; local groups meeting (community, reader, local coffee groups *etc*). This means that with the current proposals (option 'a') library use will decline.

- ii. Reducing the number of Council managed library branches will (unless specific safeguards are openly and blatantly included) be an irreversible move reducing future options. Conversely, adopting option 'b' still leaves the door open to option 'a' in the future if expectations are not met.
- iii. Furthermore, option 'b' is fully reversible: having reduced opening times of *all* branches it would be easy (once austerity years have ended) to restore opening hours.
- iv. For some wards the local library is the *only* Council-owned public building resource ratepayers/voters can use. Option 'a' is therefore detrimental to these rate-payers/voters.
- v. Option 'a' runs contrary to Bexley borough's own development plan especially in light of 'iv' above. Conversely option 'b' is in line with meeting Bexley's development strategy (*Bexley Core Strategy*). For example, *Bexley Core Strategy's* Policy CS04 Erith geographic region 'f' states that the Council's strategy for this part of the borough is one of "*encouraging further... improvement of Northumberland Heath district centre and the region's neighbourhood centres, as well as the provision of appropriate local services and facilities.*" Here, given that the Northumberland Heath library is the *only* Council owned and run building in the Northumberland Heath ward (hence 'facility') and is the *only* building resource local ratepayers have (iv above), transferring the ownership and running of this Council resource is at odds with the Policy CS04 goal. This is especially so given that the Northumberland Heath branch library is centrally located to the Heath's shopping parade and next to the Heath's car park. It is one of the key attractions bringing people to the Heath and so is valued by the Heath's traders.
- vi. We would remind the Council that point 'v' above is not trivial given the Council's overall strategic plans for the borough. The *Bexley Core Strategy* is an important document that has been signed off by the current Leader of Council. The Current Leader in her introduction to this planning document said: "*The current document is the culmination of one of the most comprehensive and wide ranging evidence gathering and consultation processes ever undertaken by the Council and reflects a robust and deliverable shared vision and strategy for our Borough. I am confident that it will help to secure a strong, sustainable and cohesive Bexley which is, after all, one of the most important legacies we leave future generations.*" We therefore hope that the Council bears this in mind when considering the future of the Northumberland Heath branch library. We would also remind it that we have been here before when the Northumberland Heath Community Forum noted in its response to the Council's earlier *Bexley Library Service Consultation of Draft Strategy 2008–2013* in 2008 that the Library Strategy "*needs to be fully integrated into the [then Bexley] Regeneration Framework, not just in letter but spirit too.*" It might now (2014) be added that the

Library Strategy needs to be integrated into the *Bexley Core Strategy* (2010); this strategy applies up to the year 2026.

- vii. Option 'a' does not further national goals to encourage a knowledge-based economy. An easily accessible, properly resourced council managed library service is more in line with these goals than a less-accessible one in which the number of council-managed libraries is reduced in the impoverished parts of the borough.
- viii. Following on from 'vi' above, the current proposals (option 'a') is not progressive. Three of the four branches the Council propose to relinquish management responsibility are in the poorest parts of the borough.
- ix. Following from 'vii' above, citing in the consultation's supporting document the success of the formerly Council managed Bexley Village Library is far from convincing. One would expect any venture, especially an educational/cultural one) to stand a better chance of success in the wealthiest and better educated part of the borough. Conversely, one would expect that such ventures would struggle more in the poorest parts of the borough where the socio-economic challenges are greater.
- ix. The Council seems to have already made up its mind (paragraph 1) as the evidence it uses to support its case is cherry-picked. It therefore seems to have closed its mind to evidence-based alternative options such as option 'b' which at the very least deserve diligent consideration.

The Council's proposals to increase opening times in remaining libraries makes little sense

18. The Council's proposals to increase opening times in remaining libraries makes little sense on at least four counts.
- i. First, if saving money is the goal then increasing opening times in remaining will do the opposite as added opening hours in remaining branches increases salary and overhead costs in those branches.
 - ii. Second, *if* those local branches transferred to non-Council private management are as successful as the Council Strategy makes out (citing Bexley Village Library in the wealthiest part of the borough) then these branches would service locals and so there would be no extra demand on the branches remaining under full Council control.
 - iii. Third, the Council cites national figures for declining library use (though that ignores non-book borrowing library usage), and under this rationale there would be no need for extra opening hours.
 - iv. Fourth, in terms of the time it takes to read a book, borrow it from the library and return it, nothing changes for individual users and so it makes little difference if libraries are opened significantly longer. The only rationale for this is that the Council expects the proposed non-

Council managed branches to fail and so forcing those prepared to travel a mile and a half to use the remaining Council-run libraries hence increasing their demand.

The Council seems to expect the proposed library branches to fail.

19. Hence, given the above, increasing opening hours as a way of saving money seems to be a *non sequitur* unless, that is, the Council's expectation is for proposed privatised library branches to fail.

Branch closures by stealth

20. The Bexley Council in its document Bexley Library Service: Engaging Communities, enriching and improving lives cites (page 5, subsection 2.1) the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2012 Select Committee report *Library Closures*. The Council is asked to note this Select Committee report's conclusion (page 3) that "*Councils which have transferred the running of libraries to community volunteers must, however, continue to give them the necessary support, otherwise they may well wither on the vine and therefore be viewed as closures by stealth*".

Conclusions

21. The Northumberland Heath Community Forum therefore concludes the following:-
- i.* It would be preferable to maintain the network of local library branches but to achieve austerity-years savings through a reduction in opening times of all branches (including the Central Library).
 - ii.* That the Northumberland Heath branch's high usage, function as the sole Council-owned public-accessed building in the ward, and the Council's planning goals in the *Bexley Core Strategy's* Policy CS04, serve as sound rationales for keeping the Northumberland Heath Library as a Council-run branch.
 - iii.* If any Branches are to be transferred from Council management then there must be a clear provision and mechanism established for bringing these back to Council management in the event of the anticipated economic upturn and/or future improvement in Council finances.

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