



Birmingham Libraries Consultation 2024

Submission

Introduction

I am making this submission to the written stage of the libraries consultation as the Member of Parliament for Northfield.

Libraries provide an essential service. Northfield's libraries combine a traditional library environment – of quiet space and access to books – with digital access and support, community activities, and a place of warmth.

As the early 2024 review of public libraries stated:

*'As the last public facing agency on the high street, library staff have a profound understanding of the needs of their users.'*¹

Libraries, and Birmingham, face a very challenging situation. Across England, more than 300 libraries have closed since 2010, as national cuts were loaded on to local government. The city lost more than 40p in the pound. It must be recognised that there is a wider political context to these proposals, which were – in part – developed by the previous Conservative Government.²

However, I am deeply concerned about any reduction in library service. I am concerned also about aspects of the consultation itself. It is important that library provision in Frankley, Kings Norton, Northfield, and Weoley Castle is maintained, and that irreversible decisions are not made.

Background

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There are four libraries within the Northfield constituency: Frankley Community Library, Weoley Castle Community Library, Kings Norton Library, and Northfield Library.

A number of my constituents use other libraries in Birmingham and, in particular, Rubery Library, which is not in the City of Birmingham although it is part of the same conurbation. This response focuses on the libraries within the constituency. It is informed by information and representations from constituents, campaign groups, and councillors.

Constituents are concerned not only by the possibility of reductions in library services but also by the reductions that have already taken place.

The constituency has already lost West Heath Library – one of only four community library closures in Birmingham since 2010. Staffing and service reductions have affected service reliability.

In the past, even the smaller libraries in the constituency opened past 17:00 during a least one evening in the week. As of 22 July, only Weoley Castle and Northfield libraries will open for a single hour beyond 17:00 once a week, and Frankley Library will open for just two days each week. Library services are increasingly difficult for people in-work to access, and this is especially true for people who work on Saturdays.

Birmingham's libraries face real cost pressures. There is a maintenance backlog, including a boiler that needs to be replaced at Northfield Library. The constituency's libraries are of varying age. Weoley Castle Library is housed in a modern building, and as such it benefits from lower running costs. The Carnegie libraries in Kings Norton and Northfield should be seen as an important part of south Birmingham's architectural heritage (alongside their wider significance, given Northfield Library's connection to the suffragettes). The difficulties of trying to find an alternative use for the old Selly Oak Library site is a caution against any attempted sale of these historic buildings.

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Birmingham’s community library services are not extensive by comparison with other large cities. In fact, the ratio of libraries to people in Birmingham is lower than the average for England, including rural and other more sparsely populated areas. The ratio is also lower than in other large cities sampled, with the exception of the city of Manchester.

Local library services - 2022³

Local authority	Population	Community libraries	Libraries per 100,000 people
Bristol	479,024	26	5.43
Leeds	822,483	36	4.38
Nottingham	328,513	14	4.26
Coventry	355,600	13	3.66
<i>England</i>	<i>57,106,398</i>	<i>2,020</i>	<i>3.54</i>
Birmingham	1,157,603	35	3.02
Manchester	568,996	15	2.64

Community benefit

Libraries play an important role in their primary function: providing access to information. The Literacy Trust estimates that the Birmingham Northfield constituency has some of the highest rates of literacy need in the country (ranked 37 out of 533 constituencies).⁴ Local libraries are particularly important for encouraging children to discover the joy of books and learning.

Libraries provide digital access for residents who do not have the internet at home, or who require support to access online services. This need is greater after the council has transitioned most of its own services to an ‘online-first’ or even an ‘online-only’ approach. Many of these residents are older, have limited



support networks, and have reduced mobility. A number of them have told me that they don't know what they would do without access to their local library. Local libraries reduce social isolation through the activities of the different community groups that they host. These groups are predominantly attended by older residents and those with young families.

All the libraries in the Northfield constituency host community events, from social events to skills classes, including on digital literacy. Again, it is unclear where these events would take place if those events were not provided in local libraries. Residents can also verify official documents at libraries, and it is unclear what alternatives would be provided, or how far they would be.

It is hard to directly compare the role played by the different libraries. Northfield and Kings Norton libraries have high usage and membership compared to other Birmingham libraries, and they benefit from support groups. There is deprivation in all the wards in the constituency, and Frankley Great Park and Weoley and Selly Oak are among the most deprived wards in the country.

I am particularly concerned about Frankley Community Library, which I fear is not fairly served by the consultation. The Council's scorecard suggests that Frankley may be particularly vulnerable to closure, as reflected in its now much-reduced opening hours. In fact, the consultation even states that:

'The current provision of Community Libraries is not concentrated in the centre of the city where there is greatest need.'

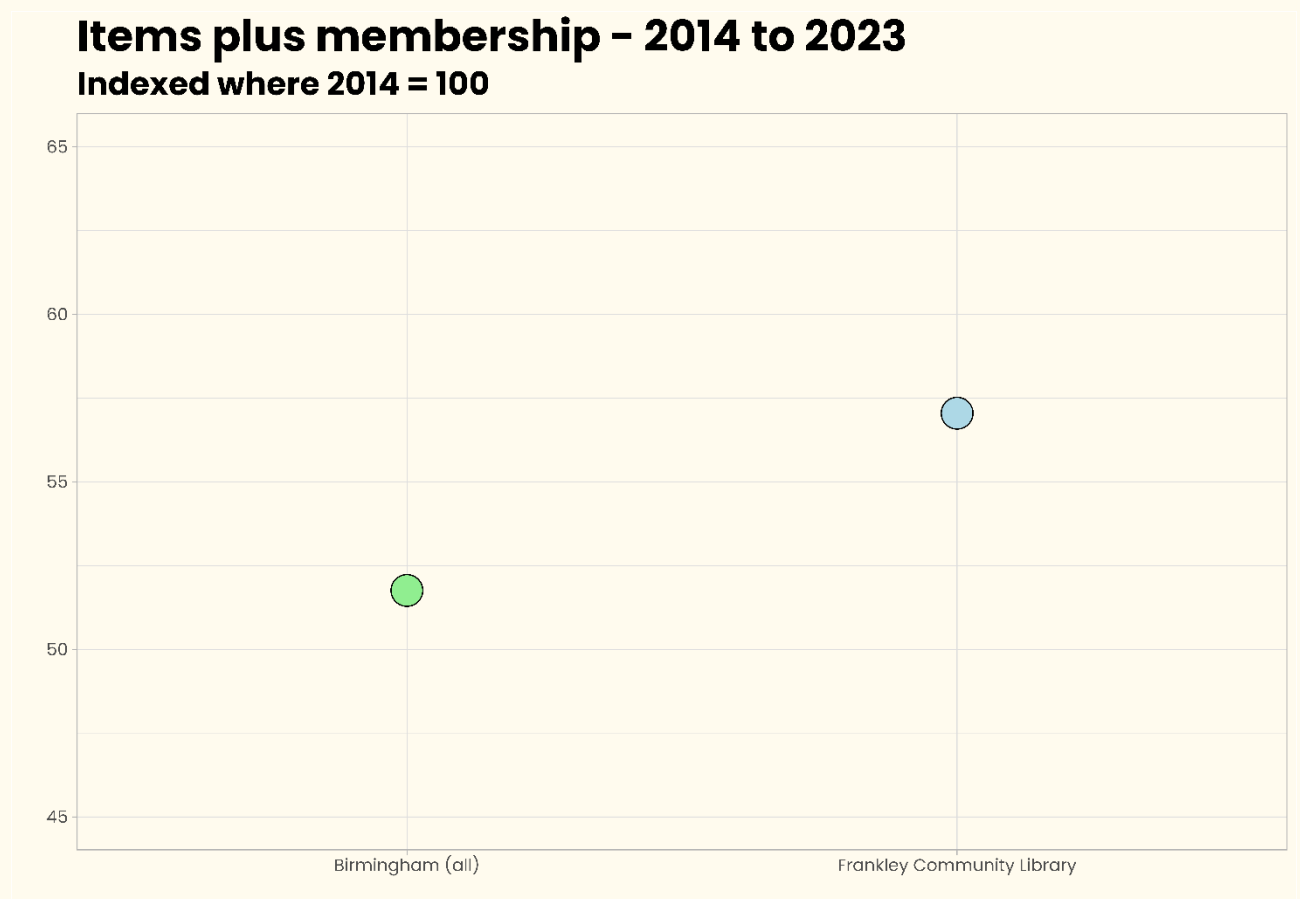
I am concerned that there is no recognition in the consultation of the importance of libraries in the city's outer estates, where there are also problems relating to employment, public transport, crime and anti-social behaviour, and education.

Frankley is a case in point. The library is comparatively well used for a Community Library of its size and location. As the Council's the figures

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(presented below) show, Frankley has proven to be *more* resilient than other libraries across Birmingham over the last decade.



The communities that surround Frankley and Weoley Castle libraries are also less well served by public transport, and I fear that much of the current footfall would not transfer to other ‘Library Hub’ sites. It would simply stop. Frankley is particularly poorly served in this regard. Frankley Library users face the farthest distance to an alternative site in Birmingham. After the loss of other amenities, a number of residents have expressed to me their concern about the wider impact on the estate, if the community asset is lost. I share this fear.



Libraries are also part of the communities' sense of identity. I can do no better than quote one Northfield resident who wrote to me:

'Northfield Library is, for me, much more than a place to access books, and is difficult to put into words.

'For me, our library is about a sense of place, embedded in our local culture. The building has been there all my life. ... [It is part of] our history, our sense of place, places where we met, talked, became friends, shared a culture, unified, became proud to be from Northfield.'

Finally, I am concerned about the reduction in the library workforce and the difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified library staff.¹ Birmingham City Council is subject to national funding decisions and national pay negotiations under the National Joint Council for Local Government Services, and the challenges that face Birmingham are shared to an extent by other authorities. Nevertheless, the loss of skilled library staff and the reduction in headcount has reduced the reliability of library services.

I would welcome an assurance that the recognised trade unions are being fully engaged as part of the consultation and the long-term planning for Birmingham's library services.

Future of Birmingham's libraries

It is hard to comment on the future of individual sites without sight of more detailed plans. However, it must be recognised that the proposed budget cuts (of more than 50 per cent by next year) are severe and unprecedented.

Greater transparency should be provided about the library use statistics that the consultation relies on, and about the role of the Commissioners and central

¹ I must draw attention to the fact that until July 2024 I was an official of the GMB trade union, which is one of the unions that represents Birmingham City Council staff.

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government, under its previous Conservative leadership, in preparing these options.

I welcome the proposal to involve community groups more, and to aim to provide a greater range of activities and services at library sites. It should be recognised, also, that asking community organisations to run libraries does carry risks. The Community Asset Transfer of Castle Vale Library, which has now closed, is a case in point. It is not clear from the consultation how the lessons from Castle Vale have been applied.

Birmingham City Council is undergoing a period of potential change, following the General Election. The City Council must be prepared to revisit the scale of the budget reduction to library services, particularly if there is a change in approach to the way that central government intervenes following Section 114 notices.

I call on Birmingham City Council to:

- Pause the consultation if there is a change in the central government capitalisation direction and its directions to the City's Commissioners.
- Assess the potential value of the Worcestershire 'Libraries Unlocked' scheme, which is in use at Rubery Library, as a way of raising revenue and extending opening hours within a limited staff allowance.
- Conduct, and publish, a review of the Community Asset Transfer of Castle Vale Library, and its implications for the current consultation.
- Publish all the data that underlies the consultation so that more informed community planning can take place.



Comments on the consultation

The consultation itself is not, in my view, accessible to all library users, and it is not adequately designed to allow all those with a stake in their future to express a view.

At 66 questions, the consultation may be hard to access for some library users: for example, this may be true of people with English as an additional language, or dyslexic readers. These are some of the most important groups that library services should reach.

The simple length of the consultation also presents a barrier to many people submitting their views. I have spoken to residents who would like to express a view, but they do not have the time. I have attempted to represent their views through this submission.

The consultation is very data-driven, but the data itself is largely obscured from direct view. As well as PDF summaries and interactive dashboards, the actual information should be made available in an unrestricted form so that the Council can benefit from independent analysis.

Finally, the consultation invites views from community groups and other representatives (such as MPs), but the questions are then structured around individual libraries. This is not sufficient when we are expressing a view about services that cross communities and must form a coherent network.

I ask that these issues be taken into account when the Council next consults on the future of vital services.



Conclusion

Birmingham's libraries face change, but that change should retain a network of local community libraries that includes Frankley, Kings Norton, Northfield, and Weoley Castle. The Council should reflect on the legitimate points raised by campaigners, and work with library users, community representatives, and library staff build a service that is fit and relevant to the 2020s and 2030s, and that is 'comprehensive and efficient.'

References

- ¹ Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), An Independent Review of English Public Libraries, July 2023, page 3
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a9211ced27ca000d27b22c/An_Independent_Review_of_English_Public_Libraries_-_formatted.pdf
- ² According to a response to a Kings Norton Library user: 'The options [in this consultation] were generated by internal teams and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.'
Birmingham City Council, All Online AM Library Consultations Q&A's, 04 July 2024, page 23
https://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/adults-communities/lc24/supporting_documents/Online%20AM%20Consultations%20QAs%204.7.24%2003.pdf
- ³ 'Local library' is defined here on the same basis as the services subject to consultation: static, local authority-provided sites that exclude large central libraries. Central libraries were not excluded from the England figure. Data sources: Arts Council England, Basic Dataset for Libraries, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-arts-museums-and-libraries/supporting-libraries>; ONS, Estimates of the population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, 15 July 2024
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalescotlandandnorthernireland>
- ⁴ National Literacy Trust, Identifying the places with the greatest literacy need, 2017
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