

Dear Croydon Councillors and MPs

Sanderstead residents are aware of the desperate financial situation facing all of Croydon but I have to ask on their behalf if the closure of five libraries will be a significant factor in addressing the deficit?

There is an increasing groundswell of public opinion throughout the borough that these local libraries - a very valuable community asset – will be lost forever and harm will be done to the most vulnerable. Not because the libraries are underused or undervalued in their communities - they are both well used and highly valued!

Croydon's One Croydon strategy sets out to transform how health and social care is delivered in the borough. By its 10-year Library Plan it is accepted that libraries have a vital role to play in this objective; to quote ***'Successful libraries play a vital role in promoting health and wellbeing, supporting people into work, increasing educational attainment, improving digital skills, bringing individuals and communities together and celebrating creativity and culture as vibrant community and cultural hubs.'***

The plan includes all 13 libraries and the closure proposal is a regrettable indication of a kneejerk reaction purely because of the current financial situation. It not only brings to a halt the desired improvements provided in the 10-year Library Plan but also, assuming the plan will be re-introduced at some later stage, reduces delivery considerably by reducing the number of libraries.

Thousands of local residents of all ages, creeds and backgrounds benefit from having access to a local library as is borne out by the Council's own data. Despite many having had opening hours reduced, the five libraries facing closure have over 186,000 visits; nearly 19,500 PC sessions for those without access to the internet at home and issue 144,473 books each year. It should be noted that footfall figures do not include those people visiting the library to use reference books, private study using own lap tops, reading a newspaper or the groups and schools which are listed later in this document. This demonstrates that these branches are catering very well for the needs of their local communities.

As Council figures show library running costs are extremely modest and provide excellent far reaching value for money. The financial saving to be gained by these closures is a drop in the ocean of the Council's current deficit.

Those most badly affected by these closures are children, the elderly and the socially disadvantaged – the very people who are least likely to voice their concerns. Before reaching any decision on library closure, it is vital that the Council looks at the long-term implications and its future impact on Croydon residents, especially its children.

Sanderstead Library

Sanderstead Library occupies a central position and is the only publicly owned community facility in the area. It provides step free access enabling use by people with disabilities, the elderly and people with young children and pushchairs. Bus stops are immediately outside the library providing a frequent service in both directions. It issues 46,091 books, 8% of Croydon's total. A huge figure given the opening hours.

It should also be noted that the usage of the library has remained constant over the preceding five years, the only Croydon library to do so when every other library has seen a decrease in total visits over the same

period. A number of user groups and activities (set out below) play a vital role in providing an essential community asset, especially for an area with a higher than Croydon average elderly population. These currently include:

- 6 local schools and 4 local nurseries;
- A monthly Reading Group;
- Twice monthly knit and natter group;
- Summer Reading challenge for children;
- Volunteer IT support sessions;
- Wiggle & Jiggle and Rhyme Time sessions.

These in no way preclude other possible new activities, some of which could generate additional income.

The Council has quoted Selsdon and Purley Libraries as alternatives. Neither of these are easily accessible by public transport with no direct bus or train service available and, although there is some shared parking at Sainsburys in Selsdon, there is no parking available close to Purley Library. Both alternatives would prohibit use by schools, local nurseries and child sessions due to distance and would prove extremely difficult for those without a car.

Existing car traffic on the Addington Road between Sanderstead and Selsdon often blocks back to Sanderstead roundabout and any scheme, which has the potential to increase this volume, should be avoided.

At recent webinars, the Council's view is that it is willing to consider community involvement in reducing costs but on a 'cost neutral' basis. There is a spectrum of possible volunteer engagement but the end result must be that Croydon Council ensures the continuation of a professional service.

Whilst willing to consider involvement, and possibly contribute to some agreed financial support for improving facilities, as we have done in the past, we would need to be actively involved in understanding what exactly the Council's plan is and what we, as a representative of the community, would be expected to take on-board both physically and financially.

Sanderstead Residents' Association has a good track record of both organising events and fund raising and is willing and able to be involved provided we understood what the Council is willing to provide in support. As an indication of our support for the library's retention, we have nominated Sanderstead Library to be an Asset of Community Value and await the Council's decision.

Over one hundred Association members signed the nomination in seven weeks, which demonstrates the strength of feeling particularly as the canvassing had to be done remotely due to Covid 19 restrictions.

The Croydon 10-year Library Plan was a bold, imaginative plan to make the best use of its libraries by extending use for community benefit and we expect it to be reinstated and implemented fully.

Heather Lindsay
Chairman
on behalf of Sanderstead Residents Association