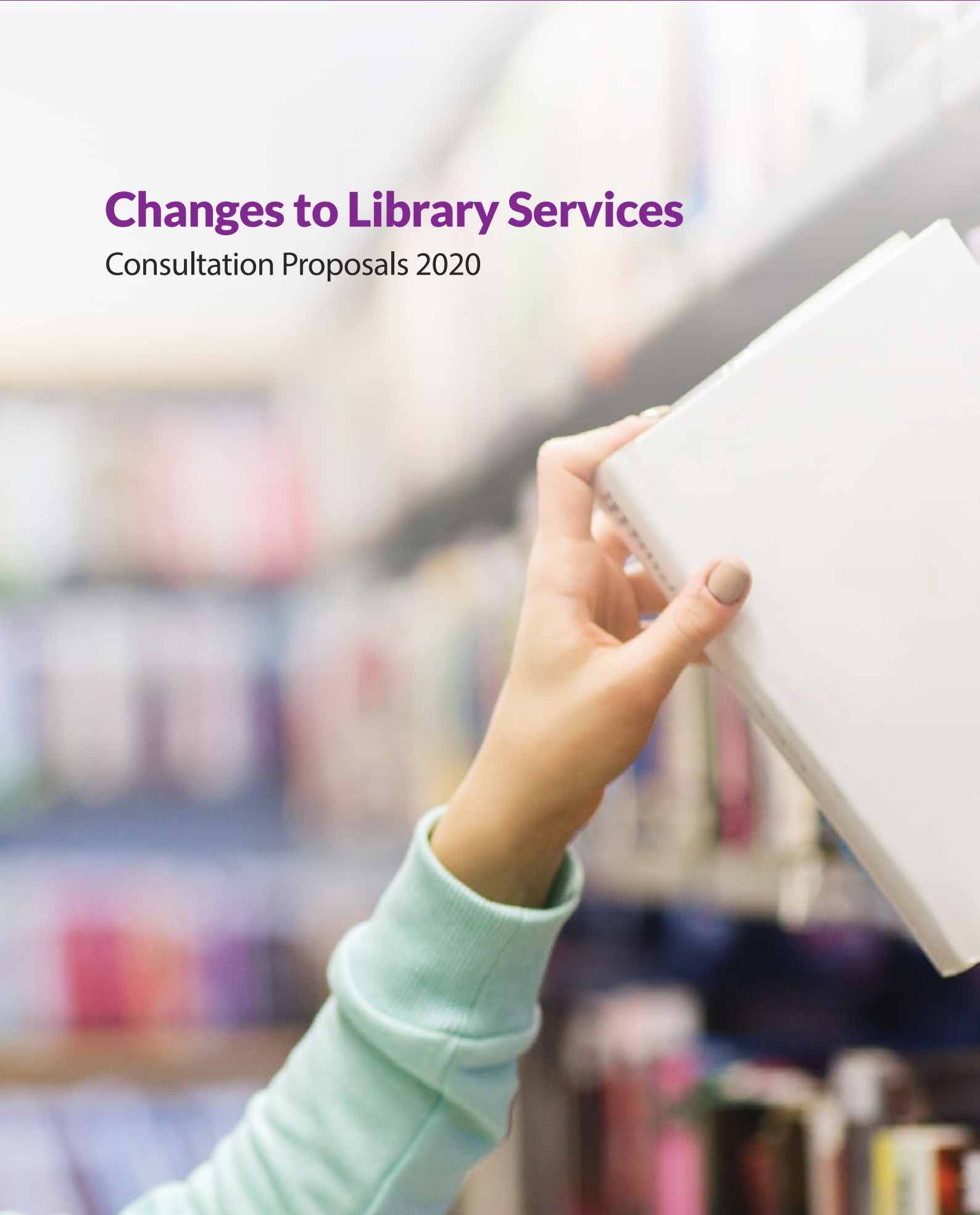


Changes to Library Services

Consultation Proposals 2020





Introduction

Bexley has six Council-managed libraries (Central (Bexleyheath), Crayford, Erith, Sidcup, Thamesmead, Welling) and six community managed libraries (Bexley Village, Blackfen, Bostall, North Heath, Slade Green and Upper Belvedere). The Council is considering options to change the way we operate our libraries in order to reduce costs and respond to changing customer usage patterns, whilst continuing to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.

This document sets out a range of proposed options for changes to the Library Service that will reduce the cost of the service, as part of the Council's response to its challenging financial position, whilst ensuring that the level of service provided is in keeping with the Council's statutory obligation to deliver library services that meet local needs. The options have been suggested following a detailed Needs Assessment undertaken by the Council which includes an analysis of usage; changes in service demand and patterns of customer behaviour over recent years; and technical innovation/new ways of working developed during the Coronavirus pandemic.

The options outlined below take account of the data available to the Council about use of libraries and community need. The Needs Assessment that has informed the proposed options can be viewed in libraries, viewed online at www.bexley.gov.uk/consultations or provided by post upon written request. An Equalities Impact Assessment has also been undertaken by the Council (which forms part of the Needs Assessment) in order to ascertain the likely impact of the options being considered by the Council on those with protected characteristics (such as those with disabilities etc) and the measures which can be introduced to mitigate or reduce impact wherever possible.

It should be noted that in addition to the operational service options identified below, additional savings will also be achieved from a restructure of the management and support teams which support the delivery of the Library Service. These back-office changes are not considered within this public consultation document, as they will not impact on the front of house service provision. All staff will be consulted separately, on any proposed revised staffing structure.

In terms of operational delivery, each of the options outlined below could be delivered on a stand-alone basis or grouped together.

Option 1 Reviewing opening hours at the six Council managed libraries

The following changes to current regular opening hours are proposed.

a) Closing each library for one day OR two half-days per week, when they are normally least busy

The Needs Assessment provides detailed information about the use of libraries. The usage data was compiled following a detailed footfall survey over a 4-month period from July to November in 2019, carried out to provide information to better understand patterns of library usage.

This data shows that there are some differences in when each library is most and least busy which can help to establish the proposed closed periods in each library that will have least impact on library users. The usage data found in Section 6.2, Section 11.2 and Appendix Twelve of the Needs Assessment shows that in most libraries the least busy full day was a Saturday.

If this proposal was progressed, the suggested whole day or two half-days of closure for each library has taken account of the times of least usage, i.e. mainly Saturdays, but footfall has also been considered in conjunction with the following principles, in order to ensure a balanced and accessible library service is retained for all residents.

- ▶ No two libraries geographically close to each other would be closed at the same time
- ▶ Some Saturday opening is maintained to ensure people who work and are unable to visit during the week still have access to the service
- ▶ Whole day closures would be spread across the week

As a result, the following closed periods are proposed for the six Council managed libraries shown as two options, 2 half day closures per library OR one whole day closure. However, these suggested closed periods will be reviewed following feedback from the public consultation.

	Option 1 Proposed am and pm closures		Option 2 Proposed whole day closures
	Morning	Afternoon	Whole day
Central Library	Monday	Friday	Friday
Crayford Library	Wednesday	Thursday	Saturday*
Erith Library	Thursday	Wednesday	Thursday
Sidcup Library	Thursday	Monday	Monday
Thamesmead Library	Friday	Saturday	Wednesday
Welling Library	Wednesday	Tuesday	Tuesday

*At Crayford Library self-service facilities could be provided as the post office would remain open on Saturdays.

This option, which would see each Council managed library being closed for one full day, or two half days a week would result in a reduction in staffing and premises costs of approximately £0.150m per annum.

[Please note that all savings figures quoted in this document are indicative at this stage. They have been provided to assist in quantifying the financial savings that would be generated from each option, to help inform the consultation / decision making process. Final savings levels will depend on the combined options selected.]

b) Ending the late evening opening hours currently offered once a week at five of the libraries (Central Library, Crayford Library, Erith Library, Sidcup Library and Thamesmead Library)

The following Council managed libraries currently have one day per week where they open until 7pm, as follows:

- ▶ Central Library on Thursdays
- ▶ Crayford Library on Wednesdays
- ▶ Erith Library on Tuesdays
- ▶ Sidcup Library on Wednesdays
- ▶ Thamesmead Library on Mondays

Section 6.2b of the Needs Assessment usage data shows that use of all of the libraries during these evening periods (5.30pm to 7pm) is low compared to daytime use of libraries. This option proposes ending these late evening openings.

This will result in a reduction in staffing and premises costs of approximately £0.035m per annum

c) End Sunday morning opening at the Central Library, Bexleyheath

Currently Central Library opens from 10am to 1pm on Sundays. The Needs Assessment usage data in Appendix Twelve demonstrates that use of Central Library on Sunday mornings (10am to 1pm) accounts for only 5% of total library usage.

If this option is progressed then Sunday opening would cease, bringing Central Library into line with the other Bexley libraries which are closed on Sundays.

If progressed this option would reduce staffing and premises costs by approximately £0.015m per annum.



Option 2 Operating all six Council libraries for part of the day on a self-serve basis, and with staff for the rest of the day.

All Council libraries have had self-service technology in place for many years (kiosks) and data shows that the majority of library transactions (borrowing and returning books) take place via these self-service kiosks. The percentage of book loans and renewals at each library that is processed through a self-service kiosk is shown in the below table:

Library	Self service issues as % of total in 2019-20
Central	70.68
Crayford	58.70
Erith	52.55
Sidcup	65.21
Thamesmead	46.66
Welling	57.40

Libraries also offer additional self-service elements, such as self-service computer booking and self-service catalogue search terminals meaning it is already possible to self-serve for the majority of core library services. Extending use of this technology would get best value from a facility that customers are already familiar with. The Council has recently (2019-20) installed new self-service kiosks in all Council libraries, so the technology is up to date and reliable. It should also be noted that Council libraries have been operating successfully in 'self-service' mode every morning since the coronavirus lockdown restrictions were lifted (July 2020), in order to ensure that users are able to continue to benefit from the service, whilst minimising face to face interaction.

If this option is progressed, then plans would be put in place for each library to operate on a 'self-service only' basis for part of each day. This would mean that:

- ▶ Whilst staff would not be available to assist, there would be an appropriate security presence to ensure visitors feel safe
- ▶ Where possible self-service functionality would be enhanced, for example through the introduction of self-service payment options and self-service printing.
- ▶ Cash payments would not be taken.

Suggested options for the 'self-service only' periods are:

- ▶ 9.30am – 12.30pm – at the start of each day OR
- ▶ 2.30pm to closing time – at the end of each day

If progressed, and depending on which other options might also be progressed, this option could reduce staffing costs by approximately £0.150m.

Option 3 Events and Activities

Currently many library events are delivered by staff, often with volunteer support (for example Toddler Times). It is proposed that we reduce the number of events and programmes delivered by library staff but that established volunteer run programmes will continue, and that we will seek new ways to deliver / fund events and activities. Section 6.4 of the Needs Assessment shows data on current levels of volunteers who operate events and activities in libraries and Appendix Fourteen shows the current events and activities programme delivered in libraries. This programme changes from time to time.

If volunteer uptake is not sufficient to operate the events and activities programme, then some events and activities may be discontinued. If progressed, the Library Service would prioritise working with volunteers and partners on the provision of those events and activities deemed most important in the public consultation and where there is an identifiable positive impact on groups with protected characteristics.

The level of savings generated from this option would depend on which other options are progressed and the resulting staffing complement.

Option 4 Local Studies and Archives Centre, Central Library, Bexleyheath - introduction of appointment system for specialist staff help

The Local Studies and Archives Centre is located at Central Library, Bexleyheath. It provides access to a wide range of archival and other materials that relate to the history of the borough. The collections are used for many purposes including by people researching their family history.

This option, if progressed, would ensure that access to the Local Studies and Archives reading room area at Central Library would remain open to all customers, but with reduced staffing. This would mean that customers wishing to access specialist materials from the collections, needing support with research tasks, or wanting to use online resources such as 'Ancestry', would access such help through a pre-booked appointment system. This approach would ensure customers could continue to get the help they need, whilst reducing operating costs, as the facility would no longer need a specialist staffed presence at an enquiry desk at all times.

Data showing the usage levels of the Local Studies and Archives Centre can be found in Section 6.5 of the Needs Assessment. The usage figure of the Centre in 2019/20 accounts for only 2.7% of the total visitors to Central Library so the impact of this measure on library users would be minimal.

It should be noted that an appointment only service has been implemented during the Coronavirus restore period.

The level of saving from this option would depend on the detailed system developed - but could be in the region of £0.030m-£0.040m.

Option 5 Community Managed Libraries – reduction of / ending of Council grant funding

There are six Community Managed Libraries in Bexley. The libraries are not part of the Council's core offer. Community management of libraries started in 2012 in Bexley and all six libraries have been community managed since April 2016. The Community Managed Libraries are:

Bexley Village Library

Blackfen Library

Bostall Library

North Heath Library

Slade Green and Howbury Community Library

Upper Belvedere Library

The Council supports these libraries with grants that are made up of a mixture of cash, seconded staff, book purchasing and building maintenance services, with funding levels for each library determined by the size of each library. The total cost to the Council of supporting the six libraries is £0.200m per annum.

This option suggests that as the current arrangements for these libraries (including current levels of agreed support and funding for each), come to an end on 31st March 2021, future arrangements for funding these libraries could be reviewed. If progressed, this option would mean that the Council's financial support for the Community Managed Libraries would either be reduced or cease. If Council financial support was withdrawn, there may still be an option for these libraries to raise funds from other sources such as charity grants, to continue operating, but a key source of current revenue would be removed, which may impact on their ability to continue to operate. If unable to operate without the same level of grant support, the Council would seek to find an alternative community provider, who was able to operate with less, or no, financial support from the Council. If no other community provider were to step forward, this could ultimately result in closure.

If progressed, this option would save money by reducing or ceasing grant payments and other forms of support (such as seconded staff) that have a financial implication on the Council.

The level of saving from this option would be up to £0.200m per annum, depending on the level of financial reduction.

Option 6 Do nothing

The Council faces unprecedented financial challenges from the increasing pressure to protect, and meet rising demand for, essential services such as adults and children's social care. The Coronavirus pandemic has also impacted negatively on the Council's financial position. Reducing the costs of the Library Service, whilst continuing to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, is one option which the Council must consider. In light of the Needs Assessment data the Council believes the options under consideration will result in savings but will not impact on the Council's duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient service, and that options will also build on new digital opportunities and support changing patterns of usage.



Option 7 Other ideas

We would welcome suggestions for any other ideas on how the Council can either reduce the cost of the Library Service or generate additional income from its library assets to offset costs.

How to respond to this consultation

You can respond by:

- ▶ Filling out a survey form – you can obtain this in Bexley libraries
- ▶ Filling out the survey online at www.bexley.gov.uk/consultations
- ▶ Writing to us at:
Bexley Library Service
Foots Cray Offices
Maidstone Road
Sidcup
Kent DA14 5HS
- ▶ Email us at libraries@bexley.gov.uk

How will this consultation be used to inform decision making?

Your feedback will be used to help the Council make decisions on the future of library provision in Bexley. Any decisions on the implementation of these proposals and/ or any alternatives arising from this consultation will be taken by the Council's Cabinet, fully taking into account the responses to this consultation.

Timescales

Please see below for indicative timescales:

Consultation begins	28 September 2020
Consultation ends (survey closes)	19 December 2020
Consultation outcome reported to Public Cabinet meeting and decisions taken	25 January 2021
Implementation of changes to the library service	Late spring/ early summer 2021



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