

Dear Julia,

Thank you for your letter and giving me the opportunity to answer some concerns that you raise on behalf of the members of Village Ward Labour Party. I hope the below provides some reassurance.

Context

The changes we are making to libraries must be seen in the context of the 56% cut in government funding that we've suffered in Lambeth. Having found £183 million in savings since 2010, we still have to find another £55 million in just the next two years. That's from a budget where we spend over 50% on care for vulnerable adults and children. This is an enormous challenge for the council as we see the reality for our residents of prolonged and unfair cuts from the Tories. These cuts have hit boroughs with higher need like Lambeth disproportionately and we have lobbied the government consistently against them. But with a Conservative majority government, we have little choice but to deal with the reality of our funding, as they try to pass on the blame to local authorities for the decisions taken in Westminster.

This financial context means difficult choices about all of our services, including libraries. We recognise the importance of libraries and that is why we have worked very hard to ensure we can keep a library service at all of our existing sites, even if that does mean changes to some of the services. But we have to take almost £1 million from the libraries budget per year: so we can't maintain the staff and buildings as they are.

Overall picture of library service in Lambeth

We are not closing any libraries in Lambeth. We are prioritising our six town centre libraries, which includes opening a brand new library along with the Picturehouse cinema in West Norwood. This will be the second new library we have opened in 5 years. The Clapham library has hugely increased visitor numbers and is an award winning building. The remaining four libraries, which are the least well used, will be delivered differently. Two are going to be run by existing community organisations. The remaining two are Minet and Carnegie.

Features of a new Carnegie

We are working with Greenwich Leisure Limited, so we can keep the building open for the community. There will be access to books, computers and study space for residents in the shape of a neighbourhood library. There will not be permanent library staff when Carnegie reopens but we will continue to provide staff to support library services and run activities on a rotating basis (Lambeth library staff will be on site every day for at least two hours).

The neighbourhood library service will also be open for longer opening hours than the existing library – simply because the building with its diverse activities will be open for longer. This is one of the attractions of the GLL model. We are keen to work with the community to ensure the building can be run as a community hub in the years ahead, expanding the range of activities that take place there for all residents.

In terms of staffing, GLL staff have mandatory DBS checks and are trained in safeguarding, as do Lambeth library staff currently. Children over the age of 8 will be

able to visit on their own with parents' permission, while those under 8 must be accompanied by their parents, as is the case now in our town centre libraries. We are happy to provide community space for free for existing groups, though this will have to be limited for other groups to ensure the space can be used to bring income for the building.

Timings

In terms of the building work, GLL are undertaking preparatory work for a planning application in late summer. Obviously the excavation of the basement involves significant work, but I'm confident that this option is the best way to bring in additional services to the building while maintaining the ground and first floor spaces for community use, including a neighbourhood library service.

Costs

The additional security costs were incurred by the council as a result of the occupation of the library by protestors. It is a shame that they took this action that meant we had to spend money on security rather than services. However, it is completely inaccurate to compare these temporary costs forced on the council, with the revenue saved for Carnegie and Minet libraries, which is recurrent and will save £294,000 across both sites per year. We have scaled back security significantly following the occupation: it is now down just to one security guard at Carnegie which is standard procedure for an unoccupied listed building.

I am also clear that we can put capital money into the building and that this is a sustainable thing to do for the future preservation of the building. But what we can't do is keep paying out hundreds of thousands pounds per year in running costs.

Political impact

In terms of the timing, this was dictated to by the end of the financial year rather than anything to do with an election campaign. While we are of course conscious of the strength of feeling in some quarters about this issue and continue to work with residents on it, I would point out that Herne Hill achieved the highest Labour vote in Lambeth (and Southwark) in May.

Future

The Council is hosting an exhibition on the future use of the Carnegie space, when the building reopens next year, on 21st and 22nd June. We are keen to hear residents thoughts on the use of the space which has not yet been determined – so we don't yet know how many books will be there. However, I would stress that the gym will be in the basement so the entire ground and first floor is available for community use, which includes the library services you mention. There will be space for books, studying, computer access and activities for library users.

I hope that clarifies the questions that your members have on this issue. I fully accept that the council has not always communicated the changes to our libraries as we should have and hopefully we are now starting to resolve this. However, this has not been helped by the campaign against them that has been happy to spread inaccurate information about what is happening, causing a great deal of concern for residents. I'm happy to answer any further questions you have may have about this.

Best wishes

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