



“Here to Help”- Barnet UNISON’s position

In the last few months Senior Library Managers, consultants and other Library staff have been in Barnet Libraries during Self-Service hours wearing green T-shirts bearing the words “**Here to help**”. The Council is employing them to encourage the public to use self-service machines and people to sign up for access to unstaffed opening hours. Many members of the public are under the misguided impression these are the volunteers as described by the Council in various statements concerning the Library changes. This situation has arisen because the Council has failed to recruit volunteers for Libraries.

In June this year Barnet UNISON raised objections to the Council imposing Here to Help duties on Library workers. We did this because our members had informed us of their concerns around this issue.

Library Workers Concerns

UNISON carried out a **survey** of our members working in Barnet Libraries on Here to Help.

89%+ opposed Here to Help duties.

Our members’ comments on Here to Help included the following:

“It is unacceptable that the remaining staff be asked to plug the gaps left by the loss of jobs of friends and colleagues. The Libraries in Self Service Opening (SSO) mode are meant to be unstaffed, which is not something the staff or public wanted. But if they are meant to be unstaffed it is ridiculous that staff should have to work in these branches in replacement for deleted jobs.”

“This hasn’t been agreed by the Union, so the Council should not just do it anyway. Also, the Council didn’t tell us this in negotiations.”

“I have received no formal training or information in dealing with “Here to Help” or open-plus. As a result I have found the experience of “Here to Help” extremely daunting and challenging; I have frequently been unable to answer queries from the public because I don’t know how to answer them correctly. It is also very difficult dealing with the public who are often equally as upset and angry about the Library changes. The lack of communication between management and Library staff is also

very poor and misleading. Myself and other members of staff feel ignored and extremely frustrated with the lack of support- and practically, involved with the latter.”

“I am very concerned that this will become a permanent role and undermine the Library Customer Service Officer (LCSO) job.”

Following discussions between UNISON and the Council an understanding was reached that LCSOs would not be timetabled for Here to Help, and that any other staff who had concerns about being so timetabled could meet their manager or the Senior Management Team to discuss these.

However there is a reluctance by many Library staff to raise these concerns with managers at all levels because they feel they will either be ignored or judged negatively.

But Service Development Librarians (SDL) have made their concerns known to the Council. Some of these have asked for meetings to discuss their objections. At the point of writing requests for such meetings by SDLs have either not been answered or arranged meetings postponed.

Instead the Council has issued an explanation to SDLs about why they are imposing Here to Help. Their arguments are:

- Here to Help is not a volunteer role
- Self Service is now part of the Library Service
- The Library Staffing Budget would not have been bigger if Open+ had not been introduced
- Library users need support in making the transition to using Self Service Opening
- Library staff can be called upon any task whatsoever if the Council claim it is to help “customers”
- Self Service Opening will protect Library Jobs.

Barnet UNISON rejects these arguments not on the basis of personal views but on evidence and previous experience.

Here to Help is A Volunteer Role.

The Council stated in *Barnet’s future Library Service* 1.18.3 states:

“The future Library service will continue to work with volunteers to support delivery of the core Library offer and will seek ways to involve communities further in the development of a modern public Library service. In particular, the service will expand the number of volunteers providing key support tasks such as volunteer shelvers and ICT buddies, releasing staff time to concentrate on complex enquiries, literacy and learning activities and service development. A volunteer Technology Enabled Opening (TEO) ‘meeter and greeter’ role will be created to provide additional support to customers during some of the technology enabled opening hours. These volunteers will help customers to use the new self-service systems, providing support to those less comfortable with modern technology.”

The meeter and greeter role described above is the same role as the Here to Helper currently in place during Self Service Opening.

The reason Library staff are carrying out Here to Help is because the Council has failed to recruit volunteers, 8 months after the new structure came into place.

Barnet UNISON consistently warned that the Council risked being unable to recruit enough volunteers. For instance we stated:

“The number of volunteers has been under-estimated. A group of 100 volunteers will be required (25 per locality) to deliver the proposed weekly 6 hours per site of volunteer supported technology enabled opening, which is expected to include cover and planned/unplanned absence of volunteers (para 1.15.20. But additional volunteers will also be needed to operate the four ‘partnership’ libraries if they are to be open a minimum of 15 hours per week. Whilst the plan is for these libraries to be operated by community organisations they will be dependent on a further 20 volunteers to provide the minimum service. Barnet UNISON estimated a total of 275-280 volunteer hours per week would be needed assuming more than one volunteer per location and to cover for non-availability

“Direct and Collateral Damage to the Future of Barnet Libraries”

<http://www.european-services-strategy.org.uk/publications/public-bodies/transformation-and-public-service-reform/options-appraisals/direct-and-collateral-damage-to-barnet-librari/barnet-libraries-unison-march-2016.pdf>

Library staff should not be compelled to undertake the role of the missing volunteers. This will be detrimental to both themselves and to the Library Service as a whole. Council staff undertaking this duty has already led to a blurring of the distinction between staff and volunteers.

There are other means to acclimatise the public to SSO (unstaffed opening) than making colleagues undertake roles designed for volunteers. Barnet UNISON suggested the following to the Council on the 26.06.17.

These could include:

- Information banners and posters in the Library
- Better use of online information
- Prominent display of large scale maps/plans of the library’s layout
- Analysing the queries from the public regarding SSO (unstaffed opening) and formulating an information and instruction program in response.

“Self Service is Part of the Library Service” – But not yet

The Council cut the number of Library posts because they believed that Library workers could be replaced with self-service machines and volunteers. Yet 8 months after our colleagues lost their jobs the volunteers to replace them have not been recruited, there has also been continuing faults with self-service and building access

technology. The Council are still contracting security guards to be on site during self-service hours.

The fundamental operating basis for the new Library structure has failed, there are not enough volunteers, and the Council is not confident that the technology will work and that the safety and security of Library users in self- service hours will be sufficient. These can be the only reasons why the Library operating system voted through by the Council last December has not been implemented.

The Library Staffing Budget would not have been bigger if Open+ had not been introduced- Where is the evidence?

In 2014 the Council put forward proposals to cut the staffing budget by either 46%, 54% or 68%. The Council felt able to put forward options for such severe job cuts because they believe staffed hours could be replaced in the main by Open+ enabled hours. The Council have not presented UNISON with any evidence that job cuts would have been worse without Open+.

Library users need support in making the transition to using Self Service Opening- the Council's failure to plan

The Library structure voted through by the Council was reliant on volunteers familiarising Library users with self-service hours. When it became apparent to the Council that volunteers were not in place the Council told UNISON at a Library Program meeting on March 16th 2017.

“Staff from the programme team will be visiting libraries during SSO hours in the initial weeks to provide assistance to users and find out the kinds of questions they are asking. This will allow us to develop the SSO volunteer role profile”

At no point during the consultations and lead up to the Library Restructure being implemented did the Council inform Library staff and UNISON that helping the public in self-service hours would form part of their duties, indeed a clear distinction was made between staffed opening and Self Service Opening.

Library staff can be called upon any task whatsoever if the Council claim it is to help “customers” – A model for poor industrial relations

Library staff have clear roles. These are set down in the Job descriptions in conjunction with their contracts. Library Job Descriptions have the following or similar clauses:

- *“The jobholder may be required to carry out other reasonable duties commensurate with the grade, as requested by line manager”*
- *“This job description is not exhaustive and may change as the post or the needs of the Council develop. Such changes will be subject to consultation*

between the post holder and their manager and, if necessary, further job evaluation."

UNISON and Library workers have **not been consulted** on changing job descriptions

The Council's imposition of tasks that should be carried out by volunteers sets a **dangerous precedent** for all Library workers and indeed all Barnet Council workers. Performing Here to Help prevents Library staff performing their Job Role and has a detrimental effect on the Library Service as tasks required by their posts are either cancelled or delayed.

As the failures of the current Library structure (long predicted by UNISON) becomes apparent the Council will try to impose further burdens on a reduced and over-stretched workforce instead of addressing the structural fault of the Library Service. Already the Council are trialling procedures at Chipping Barnet Library where colleagues are expected to make sure that Library users can stay in the Library during self-service hours. A task that should either be carried out by Open+ technology or security guards.

Here to Help staff have been required to wear a distinct T-shirt. The compulsory wearing of identifying clothing is an imposition of a uniform. The Council did not consult with or reach agreement with UNISON or Library staff on this.

Self Service Opening will protect Library Jobs – Experience tell us not.

Self Service opening has been used by the Council to reduce staffed opening (not as yet the stated extension of total opening hours) and enable Library cuts. There are a number of likely futures none of which are likely to see current Library staff levels being maintained or pay and conditions retained.

- Library usage falls. – The Council uses this as an excuse to close libraries or reduce opening hours leading to more cuts
- In the event of unstaffed hours seeing more visits than staffed hours it is unlikely that the present Council administration will retain current staffing levels given their present attitude to the need for Library staffing
- If the Council realises that self-service hours need a staff presence it is probable (as has happened elsewhere) that new posts of self-service or Open+ assistants or officers will be introduced. Because these roles will have fewer tasks and responsibilities than the current posts so they will be paid less. It is also likely they will be on "as and when" or zero hours contracts.

In the past the Council has told us:

- RFID self-service would not lead to Library job cuts but would “free up” staff to do things other than counter works. This did not happen but service points were reduced and job cuts were made.
- That Library volunteers would not replace Library staff. This year’s Library restructure saw four Libraries handed over to groups who now operate libraries operated by volunteers. Meanwhile staffed opening hours have been cut across the borough and almost half of our Library colleagues lost their jobs.

UNISON warned on all these occasions that the Council would use self-service machines and volunteers to replace Library staff. We were right then.... We leave it to Library workers (and time’s) judgement on whether Barnet UNISON or the Council is correct concerning self-service opening saving jobs.

Resolution

UNISON will continue to oppose the imposition of Here to Help duties on Library staff, escalating to a formal dispute if necessary.

To resolve this we call on the Council to:

- End the compulsory participation of Library and other Barnet staff in Here to Help.
- Inform UNISON how many Library volunteers have been recruited and how many have been trained.
- Inform UNISON how the Council intends to operate the Library Service if the required number of volunteers is not recruited.
- Inform UNISON when it is expected volunteer and machine only opening hours will begin operation.