



# Interim Analysis of Library Strategic Review

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## Introduction

In September 2010 the staff were advised that The Service was required to make savings of **£1.41m** over the next 3 years and work on a strategy for the future direction that would be undertaken. Nothing was to be ruled out including the amalgamation of branches, sharing facilities with other local authorities or the privatisation of either the entire Service or aspects of The Service.

This was of great concern to staff as they had only just been through a major re-organisation in 2009 involving job role changes and redundancies. The understanding of the 2009 re-organisation was that it would provide a measure of job security over the next few years and yet before reaching the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary further re-organisation was being proposed. Staff had already coped with teething issues and were just settling into new roles and locations when the strategy was announced with the attendant impact on morale.

## Consultation

The first consultation for the Strategy Review included engagement with the staff through contact with their representatives, staff forums, regular team briefings and visits to branches by senior management. However, the second consultation has been conducted **without** any reference to the staff and there is some **concern** that feedback sessions have been held with the public announcing changes to The Service, including longer opening hours and the opening of all branches on Mondays.

These are measures that impact on the terms & conditions, customs and practices of staff and yet **no meaningful** negotiations on these matters have taken place with trade unions. It is disturbing that these alterations have been placed in the public domain and therefore presumably presented as a **fait accompli** to the staff without attempting to achieve 'buy-in' to the changes from the staff.

Barnet UNISON is obviously concerned that the Strategy envisages **the loss** of sixteen full-time posts. Whilst it is reassuring that senior management presentations to staff have indicated that it is expected that this figure will **reduce** to nine when vacant posts are deleted and natural wastage is taken into account, Barnet UNISON has yet to be advised of the level and location of posts that will be made redundant.

Bearing in mind that the 2009 re-organisation led to the creation of senior librarian posts which **withdrew 50%** of the occupants of these posts' time from public-facing roles to back-office functions at North London Business Park, there is limited scope for removal of further public-facing branch-based staff. Already, branch staff are increasingly finding themselves working on relief at other branches, impacting on the levels of continuity experienced by library customers. Also, branch-based staff are finding it increasingly difficult to book leave due to **diminishing levels** of cover and this has impacted on morale. Further reductions in the current levels of branch-based staff will diminish contact time with members of the public and as a result will compromise the Strategy's ambitions for improving child and adult literacy and reduce the levels of service currently provided.

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Barnet UNISON has noted that residents have embarked on campaigns both borough-wide and in support of individual library branches. Local press reports have suggested, for example, that the borough wide 'Save Barnet Libraries' campaign, which sought to maintain all the current branches, staffed by a professional workforce, attracted **7,000** signatures on a petition. A campaign in support of retaining Friern Barnet Library at its current site attracted about **2,000** signatures to its petition and a Read-In at the library achieved **652** participants, while campaigners on behalf of Hampstead Garden Suburb Library have raised concerns about the way the proposals have been costed. It would be interesting to compare the numbers of respondents requesting alterations to the Service in the Strategy Review consultations with the numbers who have indicated they wish to maintain the status quo.

Why should residents requesting a change in opening hours have a louder voice than those wishing to keep a library threatened with closure open, if their numbers are less? Unfortunately, management have **declined** thus far **to share** with the trade unions details of methodology used and quantitative data raised by the Strategy and therefore it has **not been** possible for Barnet UNISON to conduct a **full analysis** and ascertain if there is a legitimate demand for change.

## **Risks/Concerns**

Barnet UNISON is also concerned at the apparent drive to recruit volunteers to operate The Service. These concerns include **issues of safeguarding**, especially with regard to **CRB** checks of potential volunteers. Barnet Libraries is justifiably proud of its provision of children's services and we would not wish to see this tarnished in the same way that the Metpro affair has damaged Barnet Council's reputation with regard to safeguarding. This matter has been highlighted by a recent initiative to recruit juvenile volunteers to assist in this year's **Summer Reading Challenge** without any instructions to staff on how this is to be managed and overseen, and without negotiations with Barnet UNISON on procedures and policies required in order to maintain a safe environment.

Similar concerns arise in the area of **Data Protection** legislation. The Service's databases hold personal information on all library members and it is therefore imperative that no volunteers are taken on until a procedure, policies and systems are agreed upon, which prohibit access to this information. Barnet UNISON would not wish to see the Council's reputation damaged in the same way that the incident involving the theft of 9,000 Barnet's secondary school pupils' personal data did in March 2010.

Finally, it should be noted that UNISON was one of the first organisations to launch a '**Love Your Libraries**' campaign, "to make sure that library services are protected and invested in, so that local people and communities can enjoy and benefit from them now and in the future". Interestingly **other organisations** concerned with the well-being of their communities have followed suit, the most recent being the **Women's Institute** which at their **2011 conference** also launched a 'Love Your Libraries' campaign to highlight the threat to local branches. We are therefore disappointed that

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the Library Strategy has **sought the closure of three libraries** with only the opening of one at the Arts Depot as a replacement.

We are confident given the demonstrable support that both local and national campaigns have achieved that the majority of Barnet residents agree with us that **no library branches should close** without a replacement that will enhance the Service and maintain the current levels of accessibility enjoyed by residents. Certainly **no closure** should take place until evidence has been produced to show that the projected Landmark library at the Arts Depot has **clear and agreed fully funded plans** with the trustees of the Arts Depot and that a definite date of opening has been agreed upon.

## **Recommendations:**

1. **No** library branches to **be closed**, since there is demonstrable support both nationally and locally that the current number of branches remain in place. Also, there are currently legal challenges in regard to Gloucestershire under the 1964 Museum and Libraries Act. The **High Court** has **imposed an injunction** on the disposal of library buildings in Gloucestershire and Barnet should therefore respect this status quo until a ruling has been made.
2. If there closures are to be made these should not take place until the plans for any projected replacements are fully funded, signed and agreed by the council.
3. That no further alteration in the ratio of public-facing and back-office functions take place, and that **no posts** be deleted until it can be demonstrated that the current levels of service be maintained.
4. The methodology, quantitative and qualitative data of the consultations is fully shared with the staff's representatives. Should the quantities of respondents to the consultation requesting changes to the service (e.g. longer opening hours) equal or be less than the numbers indicating they wish to save their libraries from closure, through the consultation and petitions, **equal regard** should be given to these numbers.
5. The management **fully negotiate** guidelines, policies and procedures regarding the **use of volunteers** and with specific reference to the issues of **safeguarding** and **data protection** with the trade unions, and that no volunteer be taken on until those negotiations reach a satisfactory conclusion.
6. Before any further changes to the Library Service are shared with the public, agreement should be reached through negotiation with the trade unions regarding changes that impact on the staff's current hours and working practices
7. Staff at libraries directly affected by the implementation of the Library Strategy are provided with full information about their future terms & conditions and locations.