

Dear Lib

Can we please just meet, and go through everything in detail? Exchanging letters is not a good substitute.

You have written in reply to a letter I sent to councillors. Here's my reply to that.

The letter was sent to all councillors days BEFORE the council meeting. It pleaded (politely) for an urgent look at the financial crisis engulfing the libraries. I said it was an emergency.

I had not a single reply. Did anyone even read it?

We were told our delegation could not speak, because nothing new has happened since November. But it has. (This was demonstrated a few days later, when the press revealed a disastrous overspend on keeping libraries pointlessly closed.)

We tried to get just two minutes of the council's time.

Disrupting the meeting was not our aim, but the council's reaction. This has happened at other meetings, with other Lambeth residents frustrated at not being heard. Does that not tell you something?

I wrote days ago to all cllrs explaining this. Have you read that one?

We have tried every possible democratic means since last October to urge a re-think.

We have always said we wanted to help work out something better.

From the very start, we acknowledged that LBL faces drastic and unfair cuts. Did you not listen?

Our point was that the full, low-cost, badly-needed service could be kept while making all the cuts required. That's still true.

Hundreds of letters went to councillors, hundreds of people marched in the rain (twice!), over 10,000 signed the petition, and we sent delegations to every relevant meeting detailing the huge flaws in the culture2020 plan. We've met various people, including you.

No answer ever came - except one mantra, in the same wording whatever the source, ignoring every point made and every question put, and repeating that LBL has no choice but to spend millions on installing unwanted gyms because... er... of government cuts.

Plus keeping a proper library service would steal funding from 'vulnerable people'. This we found really offensive. 'Vulnerable people' need libraries most. The council seems to have no idea what our libraries do.

The council's own equalities impact assessment (from p.145 in the report to Cabinet October 12) lists all those who will suffer if they are fobbed off with unstaffed, minimal provision: small children, schoolchildren, mothers and young families, pregnant women, women in general, old and disabled people, those on low incomes, those with poor English, people needing help using IT - and more.

It concludes: 'It is not possible to mitigate the impact of the unstaffed neighbourhood

libraries on groups of vulnerable people who rely on staff in their local library for support.'

It does not even mention our BAME community, who use libraries more than most. Nor children, who can't use an unstaffed public space at all unless they bring an escort to safeguard them.

You say the four condemned libraries will re-open as libraries. But they'll have much reduced space and stock, and no staff. We say they won't be libraries in any proper sense.

We have tried again and again to get information on all these aspects and more. In vain. The answers tend to be 'We don't know yet.'

You say that you listened to the users of Durning and Tate South Lambeth libraries, who emphatically don't want a gym in either. This was the minimum consultation you could legally get away with (and what did that cost?).

Users of Carnegie and Minet are just as strongly opposed to having a fee-charging gym instead of a heavily-used free library. They've been telling you this for nothing. Why not listen to them, too?

There is no sign - even now - of even a basic business plan, basic costings, basic research, basic plans for the four condemned libraries.

Set against this, all you can do is seize on a mistake I made quoting one figure. That looks a bit desperate. In fact, your projected savings of just £369k pa (not the required £800k) are reduced to £189k by allocating £180k to unknown 'community groups' to deliver literacy activities that the library staff currently do - extremely well.

You, by contrast, seem to have no figures at all.

If you are 'on course to achieve' the required savings, the report to Cabinet on culture2020 says differently.

If your own plans are 'financially sound', please show them to us. If they do cover the 'eventualities' we list, just give us the costings.

If the cost of excavating the Carnegie basement to hold a gym (because everyone is vehemently against having one in the building itself - even your own pocket 'community trust', which has no community support and is constituted to have no voting members at all), is 'reasonable', tell us how much.

You agree there are 'cost implications' for the months of delay in getting your act together at Waterloo and UNJL - so what are they, please? It's nice to know you have a 'commitment to continuity of service' at these sites. So why not at Carnegie and Minet?

The one figure you have produced - via an FoI from a journalist - is the whacking cost of security at these two closed libraries. Both could re-open tomorrow, saving you a fortune. You'd get nothing but praise for doing that.

The guards were not put in place because of the occupation. Security is an unavoidable expense if you keep two valuable sites empty and unused.

You learned this when lack of security saw thieves stripping the copper roof of West Norwood library (in nine separate visits) and then squatters, flood and fire in the closed - still unsecured - building. Never mind, problem solved by... er... paying a

commercial company millions to support turning part of it into a cinema.

Two guards were in the Carnegie ready for its closure, before there was any thought of occupation. They stayed - and had nothing to do. No problems at all.

Nevertheless, the council then piled in an extra five or so, 24/7. They also had nothing to do - except to throw out the businesses renting space in the building, whom the occupiers had been checking and letting in. Their contract was summarily broken, their businesses suffered (and LBL lost yet more income).

We got on well with the guards. It was they who told us they get a shockingly low wage of £6.70 an hour. Multiple guards stayed in place, at both closed libraries, for many days after the occupation ended (the building was left in immaculate condition).

Two are still there 24/7 at both buildings - with heating and lights full on 24/7 too. All the stock is still inside (you have no idea what to do with it); the staff are still on the payroll. What a waste.

Meanwhile, there was always an alternative plan (by the head of libraries) to keep all 10 libraries open and save your full £800k requirement. Your officers ignored it, hid it and spirited away the simple sources of funding listed in the (April 2015) culture2020 plan that would easily have funded it. Why didn't you pull them up on all that? I'd say it was a disciplinary matter.

The council was finally forced to look at the alternative by prolonged protests, its own overview and scrutiny committee and the threat of a judicial review. We really don't enjoy having to go through this kind of palaver, just to give common sense (and our willing co-operation) a chance.

By then, the plan had to be re-written to take account of your officers' sleight of hand. That's why it can no longer deliver the full £800k saving you could have had. It's still cheaper than your plan. It was produced in one month flat (including the long Christmas holiday). It is far better worked out than the muddle you have taken well over a year (and much expensive council expertise) to produce.

It contains proper figures and coherent plans (see: <http://defendthe10-lambeth.org.uk/2016/01/19/summary-of-alternative-plan-for-lambeth-libraries>).

And it still comes out cheaper than your plan-less gym idea - which will cost £3m capital and £1m revenue just for starters, plus all the other costs we've listed.

The mutual library trust idea is now being used by scores of councils, with all the groundwork done. It would take six months to implement. Even if it did take 12-18 months, as you have been erroneously informed, it would be in place right now if it had been considered with any goodwill when first proposed. You have thrown away a £800k saving. Your savings are nil - and you're now spending thousands more trying to work out the basics.

You are also misinformed about the plan's income projections. They are deliberately very conservative - and don't rely on expensive building works to implement. The

library service in fact already makes a healthy income (£400,000 in 2014). It has been diverted into coping with massive cuts, imposed year after year. For instance, £120,000 pa goes on running Waterloo library, which the council would otherwise have summarily closed a few years ago ('continuity of service' didn't figure then).

Oh, and what about the board or trust (with no representation for residents) which was supposed to be set up in January to run things?

All our worst fears have now become reality.

Yet the council's plans are in such a mess that there's still time to minimise the damage, and sort out something that works.

The funds are available. We'll happily meet you to explain.

A great many Lambeth people stand to lose their homes, their livelihoods and their public facilities while the council ignores viable alternative plans.

In the circumstances, a certain impatience is understandable.

I do hope that, even now, the council will serve the interests of service users - and its own - by starting to work co-operatively instead of coercively.

It could start by letting its own councillors state their views and represent their constituents in proper debates.

Best wishes

Laura Swaffield

Friends of Lambeth Libraries