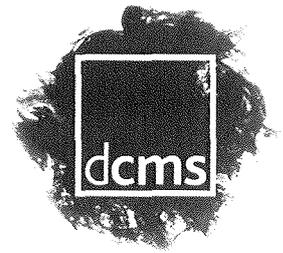


CMS 214722/DC

Sir Steve Bullock
Mayor's Office
London Borough of Lewisham
Town Hall
Catford
LONDON
SE6 4RU



department for
**culture, media
and sport**

3 September 2012

Dear Sir Steve

Local inquiry into library provision in the London Borough of Lewisham

The Secretary of State has now considered whether to intervene by directing an inquiry under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 into the changes in the library provision in the London Borough of Lewisham. The Secretary of State is not currently minded to direct a local inquiry for the reasons set out below.

However, before taking a decision, the Secretary of State wishes to receive and consider any further representations from library users, the Council, or other interested persons. Any representations should be sent to Ministerial Support Team, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2-4 Cockspur Street or by email to enquiries@culture.gov.uk by 17 September. The Secretary of State will then consider the representations made.

The Secretary of State would particularly welcome representations bringing the evidence before him up to date. He is particularly interested in the success or otherwise of the new Deptford Lounge site, usage of libraries (including the community libraries) and Lewisham's decision to join the London Libraries Consortium. However, responses are welcomed on any matter relevant to the Secretary of State's decision.

A copy of this letter will be published on the DCMS website.

Timing

The question of a local inquiry has been under consideration by the Secretary of State for some time. It was appropriate to make any decision about intervention in the light of as full a picture as possible.

Principles

The starting point is the 1964 Act. The Secretary of State has considered the duty of a local authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient service under section 7 of the Act. What constitutes a comprehensive and efficient service is a question involving a significant element of judgement. Those judgements are, in the first instance, for the local Council to make. It has intimate knowledge of local conditions and needs and has direct democratic accountability to the local population. This is a significant factor. The Secretary of State's view is that decisions about local issues should be taken by democratically elected local representatives accountable to local voters. Self-evidently, a wide range of approaches were open to the Council when deciding how to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. The Secretary of State also notes that the local authority is entitled to take account of cost in deciding whether a proposal is efficient.

The Secretary of State's duty is of superintendence. He seeks to promote and secure the proper discharge of the statutory duties on local authorities. He has power to direct a local inquiry. His approach in deciding whether he is minded to intervene to direct an inquiry is to ask himself whether, having regard to the duties on him and the local Council, there is good reason in all the circumstances for him to exercise his discretion to direct an inquiry.

In taking that decision, the Secretary of State has given consideration to a number of factors. They include:

1. Whether there is any serious doubt or uncertainty as to whether the London Borough of Lewisham is (or may cease to be) complying with its legal obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.
2. Whether London Borough of Lewisham appears to be acting in a careless or unreasonable way.
3. Whether the decision is or may be outside the proper bounds of London Borough of Lewisham's discretion, such as a capricious decision to stop serving a particularly vulnerable group in the local community.
4. Whether London Borough of Lewisham has failed to explain, analyse or properly justify its proposals.
5. Whether the local proposals are likely to lead to a breach of national library policy.

6. Whether substantial further investigation is needed. A local inquiry would be more likely to be appropriate in a case where there are substantial uncertainties as to compliance with the statutory duty, little substantive engagement with the local authority and inadequate public consultation and discussion of proposals. The converse is also true.
7. The advantages of local decision making by expert and democratically accountable local representatives.
8. Whether there is any further good reason why a local inquiry would be appropriate or inappropriate.

The Secretary of State has also borne in mind that too ready an intervention would risk preventing prompt and efficient reforms of library services. Equally, failing to intervene in an appropriate case would risk the delivery of an efficient and comprehensive service.

'Minded to' decision

The library changes in Lewisham involve the transfer of five libraries to be run by the local community, leaving seven borough run static libraries, supplemented by a service for housebound people and online library services. The seven remaining borough run libraries are at Catford, Deptford, Downham, Forest Hill, Lewisham, Manor House and Torridon Road. The library in Deptford ("Wavelengths") closed in September 2011 but reopened as part of the Deptford Lounge site, with greatly extended opening hours.

Local groups have stepped in to run non-Council libraries five libraries (Blackheath Village, Crofton Park, Grove Park, New Cross and Sydenham). They remain open and represent a valuable resource for residents of Lewisham. All but one of the community libraries have increased opening hours. However, early figures show a substantial drop in numbers of visits to the community libraries from May 2011 onwards (down around 70% in June 2011). Since then, the number of visits has improved, other than in Blackheath Village which is due to move to improved premises. However, as at June 2012, the number of books issued remained lower and had not recovered. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but may be related to reduced quantity and (during a period of transition) quality of stock and the opening of cafes and coffee shops and better reading areas on the community library premises, so people read at the library, rather than issuing books. The community libraries continue to provide access to the wider catalogue of the London Libraries Consortium.

For the purposes of his assessment as to whether to order a local inquiry, the Secretary of State has based his view solely on the seven borough-run libraries, and the home library service. The community libraries may be useful local resource but, for present purposes they do not form part of Lewisham's statutory library service. Nevertheless, the Secretary of State would be interested in receiving an update about the community libraries, to bring the totality of evidence on local library services up to date.

At the seven borough libraries, opening hours have been maintained or improved. At the Deptford Lounge (replacing the Wavelengths library) opening hours have been improved from 53 hours/week to 99 hours/week, which is an excellent service. This new library is the product of substantial capital investment and is in a location with good transport links. The Downham library is also open 80 hours/week. Catford Bridge continues to open 54 hours week, Forest Hill, Lewisham and Manor House retain opening hours of 66, 61 and 54 hours per week respectively. Opening hours at Torridon Road have been improved from 33.5 hours/week to 40 hours. In 2009-10, 83% of pre-transfer library visits and 77% of book issues were to the 7 remaining borough libraries. Had the Deptford Lounge been open in place of Wavelengths library, this figure probably would have been higher. The libraries that were transferred to community provision were comparatively little used.

Lewisham has also joined the London Libraries Consortium, giving residents access to a large number of other libraries and stock across London.

The London Borough of Lewisham carried out a public consultation prior to the changes. The borough continues to run seven libraries. The Secretary of State considers that the consultation was meaningful and properly conducted. The ultimate decisions taken reflect a sensible strategic plan for libraries in Lewisham.

The Secretary of State's current view is that the London Borough of Lewisham continues to offer a comprehensive and efficient library service. There remain a substantial number of Lewisham run libraries across the borough. Opening hours have been maintained in some cases, and greatly improved in others. Careful thought has been given to ensure that library services continue to be available to residents on an efficient and accessible basis. The changes were made following a public consultation. There appear to be no breaches of national library policy and no other good reason why an inquiry ought to be commenced.

Not every reduction in library provision will justify a local inquiry. In the present case, the Secretary of State's current view is that an inquiry is not appropriate. Further representations are invited by the date set out above before any final decision is taken.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Vaizey', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ed Vaizey MP
Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries