

Form email from the Leader of Lambeth Council 1st February 2016.

Dear []

Thank you very much for your email.

Please be assured that I am fully aware and appreciative of the role that libraries play within society and specifically within Lambeth, where space is very often at a premium and young people in particular look for a quiet room to complete their studies.

Last year the council ran a wide-ranging consultation on the future of our cultural services, welcoming all options on how we could maintain the best possible service for all our libraries.

In light of the harsh cuts imposed by a Tory Government, councils are facing tough choices over how to prioritise their spending.

Within this difficult financial position, the proposal we put to local people retained our popular and most-used town centre libraries, with increased opening hours and full time professional library staff. Lambeth's town centre libraries are the most popular, accounting for over three quarters of all library visits.

We're proud to have invested in our local libraries. Under Labour we opened the new Clapham Library in 2012, completed a £1.4m renovation of Streatham Library in 2014 and we are currently working on a deal to bring a new library to Norwood.

But with a 56 per cent cut in our funding from Government, there are no easy choices. The consultation therefore originally proposed to withdraw services from our neighbourhood libraries and sell Waterloo and Minet libraries in order to reinvest that money into safeguarding our libraries for the future.

We have listened and carefully reviewed all of the options that came forward. The most credible proposal that came forward was from Greenwich Leisure Limited.

We are keen to keep our libraries open and playing a full part in the local neighbourhood. In order to do this we are working through the GLL proposal in more detail, as well as giving detailed consideration to an updated proposal for a staff mutual. This proposal, which the Cabinet agreed to consider, was a recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and will be examined by a team including an independent expert in staff mutuals.

Thanks again for getting in contact.

Best wishes

Councillor Lib Peck
Leader of Lambeth Council
Labour, Thornton ward

Stephen Carlill's response 6th February 2016.

Dear Lib,

Thank you for copying me into the form email you sent to []. Readers of it will no doubt notice that instead of responding to the corrections to the financial information provided by Councillor Edbrooke, it merely repeats the most reasonable sounding element of the misinformation. Lambeth's funding from central government has been reduced, but not by 56%. Other income streams have been increased including the Council's share of Business Rates, which is being doubled. Why are you choosing to close public libraries when none of the other Inner London boroughs has made the same choice?

You closed Clapham Library and replaced it with a multi-purpose building which does not contain any quiet space. You plan to replace Carnegie and two other libraries with some things which do not include any space set aside for a library use; only "a small selection of books" and computers in a room to be used simultaneously for other purposes. Where are you suggesting young people should look for quiet study space and why is it only to "complete their studies?"

The proposed Mutual would be a Community and Staff Mutual, with the staff being in the minority. The proposal was received from the Head of Libraries in April. It was rejected in September and assessment of it has only just started. It is only receiving consideration because the Overview and Scrutiny Committee intervened and a user of Carnegie Library initiated the procedure for Judicial Review. Is this your idea of "welcoming all options on how we could maintain the best possible service for all our libraries?"

The Clapham facility was provided by a developer in return for being allowed to erect a very large building. It is very expensive to run and the use of it is in continuous decline. The number of visits to it in April to December this year was 13% lower than a year earlier. In contrast visits to the three libraries whose buildings you propose to hand over to GLL increased by an average of 57%. Carnegie has the busiest Children's Library in Lambeth. You planned to close Streatham Library but relented because it is the only library in the Streatham Parliamentary Constituency and it would not have been politically acceptable to leave a Constituency without even a single library. The money for its refurbishment was provided by the Mayor of London. Where in all this was there any investment by Lambeth or anything of which you could be proud?

The deal proposed for West Norwood is to build a cinema, including a cafe/bar and restaurant, and then let it rent-free for at least the first five years. Friends of West Norwood Library are campaigning hard to have some worthwhile library provision included in this "Town Centre Library." The proposal for Carnegie and two other libraries is to close them for about a

year, spend £3 million on building works and then subsidise their new use or lack of it over the next two years from the revenue of Council leisure centres, topped up by £1 million from the Council's revenue reserve. The cost of keeping the three as libraries would be £400,000 a year. Keeping the libraries is much cheaper than your plans, even without taking into account savings on Adult Social Care or Education. The libraries were donated to the people for use as libraries and on the understanding that the Council would provide the running costs. If you can find money for a cinema and gyms why do you not find the smaller sums needed for the libraries?

The five Town Centre libraries are already open much longer hours than the other five libraries and it is not therefore surprising that they have more visits. However, they account for a diminishing share of visits and this is currently 70%. The bulk of the cost of running a library is staff costs. These are proportionate to opening hours and more intensive use is made of the non-Town Centre Libraries. Lambeth have proposed increasing the hours of the Town Centre Libraries but only if volunteers come forward to dilute the paid staff. Is not your paragraph dealing with these matters misleading?

The proposals put out for public consultation were devised by councillors and senior council officers without making any enquiries of the relevant council services. You completely ignored your professional librarians. Had you asked the Council's Property Management people they would have told you that "sale in the open market" of the sites of Waterloo and Minet Libraries was impractical. Waterloo was, and is, subject to a Compulsory Purchase Order in favour of Network Rail. Rights of light for the properties either side mean that much of the Minet site could not be developed without first acquiring those properties. When members of the public pointed out your mistake you withdrew your proposal to sell these two sites. Is this what you mean by "listened and carefully reviewed?"

In case recipients of your email have not seen it I attach a copy of "the most credible proposal."

I look forward to receiving your reply.

Regards,

Stephen Carlill

The Leader's Reply 10th February 2016.

Dear Stephen

I have read your email to myself and the Lambeth Labour Group. I would like to correct the many inaccuracies.

It is a fact that our settlement from central government has been cut by 56%. It is also a fact that many deprived Labour-controlled councils like Lambeth are facing cuts more than ten times harsher than those imposed on Conservative-controlled councils. Indeed, the Tory Chair of the Local Government Association has warned the government that the Chancellor's cuts are delivering a "knockout blow to cherished local services".

Across the country 400 libraries have closed already. We are keen not to close any of our public services, but we do have to scale back. We are not the only London authority in this position: to cite one example, our neighbours in Lewisham are looking to have three community libraries.

You criticise Clapham Library, yet this much-loved, brand new community asset came at no cost to the public purse because of the new development we negotiated. I make no apology for this. There were 422,854 visits in 2015.

We are giving detailed consideration to the updated proposal for a staff mutual. This proposal was indeed a recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee; that is how the process works. It is now being examined by a team including an independent expert in staff mutuals.

I am afraid the financial proposals you have attempted to outline do not make sense in the context of local government finance.

And while you are wrong to infer that we had plans to close Streatham Library, you are right that some of the refurbishment money was paid for by the Mayor. This was as a direct result of the bid that we submitted successfully.

It is a fact that over three-quarters of our library visits are to our five town centre libraries. They are fully accessible and, vitally, are all well-served by public transport. We have looked at boroughs like Merton, who have managed to keep their libraries open for longer through training volunteers. There is nothing misleading about this.

I note that your email ignores UNJL, which is pleased with the grant increase we have managed to secure, and our commitment to this thriving neighbourhood library.

Against a backdrop of increasing austerity, competing funds and our commitment to serving the most vulnerable, we want to see all our libraries open and safeguarded against future cuts. Perhaps your future contribution could be how to help us best achieve this ambition.

Regards

Cllr Lib Peck

Councillor Lib Peck

Leader of Lambeth Council

Labour, Thornton ward

Stephen's reply 11th February 2016.

Dear Lib,

Thank you for your email. Even though you have not attempted to answer any of my seven specific questions your response is very welcome as it indicates that I need to deal in more detail with your perseverations and poor recollection of past events.

Your "56%" relates to one element of Lambeth's revenue. With a reduction in staff numbers from 120 to 80 Lambeth Libraries have already suffered cuts which are more than proportionate to the reduction in the Council's overall revenue.

As you may recall, this email conversation was prompted by an email from Cllr Edbrooke relying on an old newspaper story based on information from the Institute of Fiscal Studies. Their up-to date assessment, available at www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8095, is that:

"Looking ahead over the next 4 years, cuts to spending power will be much more evenly distributed across councils than they were over the last parliament...Nevertheless, cuts will still be a bit larger on average for (principally poorer) areas who are most reliant on grant (for which cuts are set to average 9.2%), than for those who are least reliant on grant (for which cuts are set to average 6.8%)".

This is a long way from your figure of 56% and your suggestion that Lambeth is suffering ten times what is being inflicted on other local authorities.

No one doubts that many libraries have closed, especially in villages. However, closing libraries is a choice and it is a choice which Lambeth alone amongst Inner London boroughs has chosen to make.

When the multi-purpose accommodation in Clapham was being built you trumpeted it not as a library but as the "flagship Clapham One Community Hub." At the same time you proposed closing Streatham Library and instead providing a "library service point" in Gracefield Gardens Customer Service Centre. Clapham has been relabelled as a library for the same reason that Streatham Library stayed open. You cannot leave a

Parliamentary Constituency without even a single library and all libraries in Vauxhall Constituency are under threat of closure.

If the Clapham facility is "much-loved" this is not reflected in the number of visits. Indeed the closer one looks at the decline the worse it looks. It had 87 visits this year for every 100 that it had last year. Yet Carnegie, Minet and Tate South Lambeth on average achieved 157 visits this year for every 100 last year. There is no reason to think that the management or staff are less resourceful or enthusiastic about increasing the use of Clapham than they are about increasing the use of the libraries. Clapham is therefore 45% down on what could be expected if it were a library.

The proposal is for a Community and Staff Mutual, with the Staff in the minority. It had to be updated because of the delay of eight months in beginning to consider it.

Your proposal for Carnegie, Minet and Tate South Lambeth libraries spends money instead of saving it. The cost of running these libraries as part of the Mutual would be £400,000 a year, that is, a total of £1.2 million over the next three years. You propose to close these libraries' buildings for a year then subsidise the buildings use over the next two years by an undisclosed amount from leisure centre profits plus a further £1 million from Lambeth's revenue reserve and £120,000 for visits to provide library services at the buildings. To produce this deterioration in the revenue position you are budgeting £3.12 million in capital. You require the buildings to break even in the second year of operation. They are obviously most unlikely to do that given the level of subsidy previously and the absence of any real demand for what they offering.

It is no longer true that over three-quarters of library visits are to Town Centre libraries. So far the proportion has reduced to 70% and it continues to diminish. The Town Centre libraries currently have 58% of the total opening hours.

The Town Centre Libraries are not fully accessible to mothers carting young children and buggies on and off buses or to elderly people with mobility issues. They are accessible only with considerable difficulty. They are not accessible at all to people with autism or severe stress problems. If your current plans went ahead you would deprive the most vulnerable of their libraries.

Your previous email juxtaposed a promise of increased opening hours with "full-time professional staff" and did not mention that the increase would depend on volunteers coming forward to dilute the work of paid staff.

I am not aware of any reason to comment separately on Upper Norwood Joint Library. As you may recall, it was an instruction to start clearing the books from the shelves of this library which provoked the staff of all the borough's libraries to walk out in November.

Regards,
Stephen Carlill