

Friends of



UPDATE April 2016

Local residents received a leaflet on 6th April from Lambeth Council about the Carnegie Library. This is a clarification on the key points.

Plans for the library

Carnegie Library was closed by Lambeth Council on 31st March, to stand empty until it is converted into a fee-paying gym run by the leisure company GLL. No plans have been seen for the gym, nor has anyone applied for any planning permission to convert this Grade II listed building for this purpose.

A Community/Staff Mutual proposal for all Lambeth's 10 libraries was worked up last year by the Head of Lambeth Libraries. Her detailed business plan was rejected by Lambeth, after months of delaying. This was on the basis of an assessment using criteria that have not been applied to the GLL plan, since no such plan seems to exist.

Will it still be a library or not?

The GLL gym will have a room with an unspecified number of books, but without librarians. This is what Lambeth call a 'neighbourhood library'. In our view this is not a library.

Lambeth's own documentation on the number of books seems to have changed, from 'rotating stock' and a 'small selection' of books in previous documents, to the 'same stock'. This is welcome news and we look forward to hearing more detail. Presumably this means the books will stay in the same library areas, as the same stock will need the same space: we look forward to Lambeth's confirmation. Lambeth also say there will be some computer facilities. It is not clear how many. Many people find it difficult to use computers and will struggle without dedicated library staff to help them.

However, there is no floor plan to show exactly what space will be available for different uses and where, so these statements are impossible to consider meaningfully.

The staff in the building will presumably be gym or general facilities staff. We are told that 'library outreach staff' will visit on a 'very regular basis'. This confirms that there will be no professional librarians staffing the library. It is also not clear what is meant by 'very regular'. Only £100,000 pa has been allocated to curate activities in four or five so-called 'neighbourhood libraries' which is absurdly inadequate. Alongside their apparent reconsideration of the number of books, we hope that Lambeth will also reconsider their position on ensuring a full-time presence of professional librarians.

Will children be able to use it?

Lambeth's leaflet states that there will be access for children but the concern we have raised is about access for unaccompanied children, in the absence of professional librarians (who have the right checks and are trusted by the community). The question of whether unaccompanied children under 16 will be able to use the books, desk space and computers has not yet been clarified by Lambeth.

Excavating the basement

Lambeth's leaflet now locates the gym in the 'unoccupied basement' of Carnegie Library. This is a new assertion, not previously mentioned formally. The existing basement is in use, and does not run the full length of this listed building because of the hill. It would need extensive excavation to accommodate a gym. This raises several questions:

- Is there any detailed plan, including proposed floor plans, for this basement gym option? As far as we are aware, there is not.
- Has planning permission been sought for this? Given that the Carnegie Library is a Grade II listed building, this is not a trivial question. Apart from being an unwarranted intervention, excavation could destabilise the building.
- Has the cost of excavating the basement been estimated? Has this been budgeted for? What portion will Lambeth Council bear and what portion will GLL bear?
- What is the fallback option in the event that planning permission is denied?

The 'Carnegie Community Trust'

The Council has made several statements that they are working with the 'Carnegie Community Trust' with the intention that this Trust takes over through an asset transfer. However, this Trust is not a community organisation. It has a handful of members, including ex-councillors, and in a previous incarnation ('The Shadow Trust') included a serving councillor. It is not an accountable body, is not elected and does not represent the library members or visitors, the people who rent office space or the many groups which meet in the library (Ruskin Readers, Chess Club etc.) The Friends of Carnegie Library (which has an accountable governance structure) has represented the library community since 1999, working closely with the librarians and user groups to improve the library. The council has sidelined the Friends.

Cuts

Lambeth blames the library closures on the cuts to their budget. However, this is not the first time they have tried to close the library and the plan to convert the library into a gym will cost a great deal of money. Meanwhile the library will stand empty, but at a cost to the council because the building will continue to function. It houses library offices, including the home visit and stock support services, as well as those who rent desk space. Lambeth will also pay for 24/7 security guards.

Libraries are front-line services used by many vulnerable people in our community, supporting learning at all ages and reducing isolation. So Lambeth's statements that they are protecting services for the vulnerable by closing libraries make no sense. Andrew Carnegie gave this building to the community 110 years ago for the purposes of a library because he understood the importance of libraries for education and increasing people's opportunities in life. The Carnegie Library is a welcoming place, which is used by people of all ages and all walks of life in our community.

The #carnegieoccupation has drawn national and international attention to plight of our libraries in Lambeth. We hope it will encourage Lambeth to reconsider. We thank all of you who have given your incredible ongoing support to efforts to save the very special Carnegie Library, along with all 10 Lambeth libraries, for our whole community and for future generations.