

**Topline findings from research into
Barnet Council's 'public consultation'
on reform of its public library service.**

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1. Background and Methodology

Barnet Council wishes to cut the cost of running the borough's public libraries and has launched a public consultation consisting of a background booklet that people are invited to read before filling in a questionnaire. These consultation documents can be accessed at engage.barnet.gov.uk and hard copies can be obtained at the borough's libraries.

The Research Practice is conducting research amongst members of the public to assess people's response to the consultation booklet and the questionnaire.

The research commenced with depth interviews in which respondents were asked to explain their reactions to the questionnaire as they attempted to complete it. Respondents were asked to read the background consultation booklet prior to being interviewed and this document was available for perusal and reference as respondents attempted to fill in the questionnaire.

Time constraints led to changes in the methodology. On average respondents claimed that their initial reading of the consultation booklet took about an hour, after which they still found it difficult to comprehend. There was further study of the consultation booklet during, and after, the initial interviews as respondents tried to make sense of the questionnaire. In the initial interviews respondents took on average about two hours to try and understand and respond to the questionnaire.

The time required to understand the consultation document and to respond to the questionnaire (3 hours plus) put a strain on the interview process and led to a change in methodology. To facilitate the excessive amount of time required to understand and respond to the consultation, respondents were asked to read both documents in their own time, and even to complete the questionnaire, before an interview. This approach proved better suited to the time demands demanded by the consultation process.

2. Summary of Findings

The research revealed that people find it close to impossible to respond to the consultation in any meaningful way using the current questionnaire. Indeed the longer people spend on the consultation, the more confused they become and the more they perceive the Council's plans to be flawed.

It is important to understand that the research process (depth interviews, etc) forces respondents to consider these issues more carefully than they are likely to do in a 'real life' situation. In a 'real life' situation they are likely to simply dismiss the consultation as unintelligible and/or too demanding of their time. If they persevere and manage to submit a questionnaire, they are likely to unwittingly endorse propositions with which they do not agree.

Most respondents said that, left to their own devices, they would not have been able to complete and submit the questionnaire even though they wanted to express their views on the future of the library service. This augurs badly for likely response levels,

with some suggesting that this was the intention of those who had designed the consultation process.

3. Reaction to the Consultation Booklet.

The consultation booklet proposed three options for reconfiguring the library service. Each option contained so many variables that people found them difficult to understand and compare.

“I kept trying to hold all this in my head as I filled in the questionnaire but it’s impossible. Even when I’ve got the three options in front of me I can’t get my mind round them.”

“It’s too complicated to take in. Wouldn’t most people just be interested in the library they use. But it never asks me about that.”

Moreover key components within each option raised questions and scepticism. For example, the consultation document placed much emphasis on reducing libraries to one tenth of their current size. But this left respondents wondering what such small libraries could contain and whether they would be worth using. The consultation document provided no information on this.

“It says libraries would be reduced from over 5 thousand square feet to just 500 square feet. But what would they be cutting out to squeeze it down to this size? The children’s section, the computers, the seats? Then later I’m supposed to rate this idea but I’ve no idea what a 500 square foot library would contain or whether it would be any use.”

People also had difficulty with the idea of fully-automated libraries that would not require any staff. Respondents pointed out that current library technology did not work well and that staff are always needed to explain technology and to sort out problems when it goes wrong. There were also security concerns about un-staffed buildings. Once again the consultation document provided no reassurance on this or evidence that fully-automated public libraries are a success.

“Have you tried to use those machines for bringing things back and borrowing? There is often something that won’t register and you have to go to the staff counter to sort it out. The idea that the whole library could be automated is fantasy”

“I don’t see this working for the elderly, or parents being happy for their children to use an un-staffed building”.

Respondents also questioned why it was more expensive for the Council to run libraries than all the other alternative ways of running the library service.

“It’s saying that it’s more expensive for the Council to run the libraries than other bodies. But there is no explanation of why.”

“If I understand this, it is claiming that if you want the Council to run things then you’ll get more cuts. So its kind of bullying you into accepting that the Council shouldn’t run the libraries.”

The consultation booklet claimed that its three options are based on rigorous work and previous consultations with the public. Yet apart from the driving principle of wanting to reduce the cost of the library service, respondents could see little evidence that the proposed reforms related to the needs of the public. Indeed the longer some individuals spent reflecting on the consultation process, the more they found inconsistencies that suggested the proposed reforms had been arrived at in an arbitrary way and without careful consideration.

“It says that people value the libraries as public spaces so why reduce them to a tenth of their size.”

There were other examples of inconsistencies that suggested the three options had been arrived at in an arbitrary way. For example, respondents sometimes assumed that if two branches were to be closed (specifically East Barnet and Childs Hill under option 3) they would be the least popular/busy ones. However East Barnet was not included in the six libraries facing closure under option 2, prompting a suspicion that the libraries demarcated for closure had simply been selected at random. Some also wondered why there was no option for East Barnet to be run as a community library under option 3! This suggested to some that the three options had been arrived in an arbitrary way and without any consideration or care.

“I can’t make any sense of this. Why is my library (East Barnet) not a candidate for a community library? Why is that not an option? I’ve the impression these options are just random and no one has really given proper consideration to them.”

As the questionnaire ultimately admits that the eventual shape of the library service could embrace a mixture of elements drawn from all the options, there appears to be no reason for flagging up the three current options other than to overly-complicate the consultation and deter public response.

“Look, at the beginning of this stupid questionnaire it says I need to read the consultation booklet and if I’ve a few extra weeks free I should read all these Council papers and reports (Committee Report, Options Paper, Needs Assessment, and Equalities Impact Assessment) So I ploughed through the Consultation book and tried to understand the three options and now its saying that the final shape of the library service might just mix different elements from the three options. So why get me to try and memorise these three options in the first place? They are superfluous and this whole consultation is just wasting my time. This is making me very angry.”

As respondents tried to fill in the questionnaire they would occasionally refer back to the consultation document to try and clarify what various terms meant (e.g., ‘Amazon lockers’, ‘staff owned mutual’, ‘Barnet Libraries Supporter Scheme’, etc). Respondents eventually noted that the consultation document did not provide the necessary background information to aid completion of the questionnaire.

“The consultation booklet doesn’t help you fill in the questionnaire. It doesn’t explain things. It doesn’t even tell you what proportion of the library budget is to be cut”

“The more you tear out the business buzzword bullshit the more you realise there is no substance here. It makes assertions but there is no back up.”

I read this background document (consultation booklet) because the questionnaire tells you to. But it was a complete waste of time. It doesn't help at all."

4. Reaction to the Questionnaire

The questionnaire, which the public are invited to complete after reading the consultation booklet, prompted far more difficulties and complaints. Respondents found it longwinded and confusingly constructed.

Analysis of the questionnaire on an individual question-by-question basis reveals that hardly any of the questions were straight-forward or made sense to respondents.

"This (Q4) is more a question for a business consultant who had studied the data than for the public."

"If you ask people (Q4) whether they prefer closing two libraries or six wouldn't everyone say two? unless one of the two is their library."

"Am I being asked (Q6 & Q7) when the libraries should be staffed in general or just in relation to when I use them. It's not clear."

"Why ask me (Q6 & Q7) to double guess when the libraries should be staffed? Surely when they are busiest or need the staff. Don't they have transaction data on the computer system to answer this? If not, what have they been doing all these years?"

"Questions 8 and 9 are a con. They are trying to get you to support unstaffed libraries by telling you staff will be available to help. It's nonsense and its rigged"

"This (Q11) is just completely insane. Can anyone really answer this?"

"I can't answer this (Q11) without knowing about the individual buildings. It is not a theoretical issue."

"If ways of increasing income have been identified why ask us (Q13), why not go ahead and do it?"

"What is a staff owned mutual (Q15)? It can't find it explained anywhere."

"I can't fill this in (Q17). I don't know anything about these services. What they are, what the current levels are, or what the demand is."

"Is question 19 another trick. Who wouldn't agree with 'improving self-service online technology' so why ask the question unless it's a sneaky way of getting you to support self-service fully-automated libraries."

"I have no idea how to answer (Q22 & Q23). To me the options seem completely daft."

"What am I supposed to do here (Q27)? Do I need to fill one of these in? And why 'one box only'? Why do they not want you to fill in part 2 and 3. This is really unintelligible."

Rather than deal with every question on an individual basis, this document will simply report some general themes that emerged as people tried to fill in the questionnaire.

Some questions seemed so bland that they did not seem to be worth asking.

“What’s the point of asking me this (Q2)? All of these are things that everyone would agree with, even though they don’t directly relate to the way I use the library. Is anyone going to say they want ‘a library service that doesn’t engage with communities’ or ‘that doesn’t withstand current and future financial challenges’? So what’s the point of asking it? Just a waste of time.”

“Just the usual bland mission statement rubbish (Q2). Platitudes everyone is going to agree with. Better to have asked me what I want out of the library.”

Other questions referred to services and propositions with which people were unfamiliar. As there was no guidance on the full meaning of these services or propositions in either the questionnaire or the consultation document, people found it impossible to confidently respond.

“How can I comment on whether they should maintain the current levels of the mobile library service or the local studies and archives service when I don’t know what the current levels are or what the need is?”

“What is an Amazon locker. Does it tell you anywhere?”

In places the questionnaire asked people to comment on issues that, as ordinary members of the public, they did not feel qualified to answer. This was because such issues needed to be assessed in the context of detailed financial information, data on library usage patterns, and perhaps insights into consumer behaviour and attitudes. Without such information one had no way of knowing the implications of each option in terms of cost, viability, or likely impact on users of the service.

“The only person qualified to answer these questions would be the head of the library service as they would hopefully have all the facts and figures at hand.”

Some questions (e.g., number 11) were felt to raise so many vague imponderables that it was impossible to weigh up what one was being asked.

“This (Q11) is so ridiculous. It’s so vague and nebulous. These statements could mean anything. How can anyone assess this? And wouldn’t most of this cost a fortune? I thought they were trying to save money.”

The fact that some questions raised the prospect of enhanced library services also served to create confusion.

“It’s all very difficult to fathom. There is talk of enhancing the service and extending opening hours but it’s all mixed up with cuts and closing the branches.”

Ultimately respondents felt that the questionnaire gave them little scope to express their own views. After struggling with the questionnaire for up to two hours, some concluded that the whole consultation process was a ‘con’. Some felt it was not a genuine consultation, but had been devised solely to fulfil a bureaucratic need for the Council to claim it had consulted. The questionnaire suggested to some that the

Council was not interested in either the library service or in the public's genuine opinions. Instead it seemed to trick people into unwittingly endorsing reforms and propositions with which they did not agree. Some became angry that their time and public money was being wasted on a survey that seemed to have been designed to trick the public.

"Not one question relates to the way I use the library"

"I filled it in as carefully as I could and it took an age because I wanted to submit it. But now I think it's pointless. The Council have made up their mind what they want to do and this doesn't enable you to have your say at all."

"Now that I've finished filling this in, I realise the Council have done this because they are legally obliged to do a consultation not because they care about the results."

"It comes across as a series of daft questions with no sense of direction. Maybe with the aim of putting you off the scent or discouraging you from continuing."

"At first I didn't get it but the interview has opened my eyes. It's been cobbled together to steer you into giving the answers they want."

"So the Council want to knock down the libraries, build blocks of flats on the land, with small unstaffed library rooms that no one will use so they can say 'ah, there is no demand, let's sell these off as studio flats.'"

"Spending our money to deceive us is quite wrong. Are there no standards that apply to such consultations?"

Many said that left to their own devices they would not have been able to complete and submit the questionnaire even though they wanted to express their views on the future of the library service. This augurs badly for likely response levels, with some suggesting that this was the intention of those who had designed the consultation process.

"I've stuck with this because you are interviewing me. But the average person would have given up long ago. I can't imagine anyone completing this alone. Maybe that's the intention. To make it look like nobody cares about the libraries."

The Opinion of the Researcher

Instead of a straight-forward and transparent approach to library reform, the Council's current proposals and consultation seem unfit for the purpose.

Given the severity of the proposed cuts, one might have thought that the Council would be keen to adopt a reform process which is straight-forward and transparent. This would help reassure the public that library reform had been managed sensibly and with the intention of minimising inconvenience to library users. A simple process should suffice. For example, examination of data on library traffic and usage, by branch and time of day, should help identify when and where reduced library access would cause least public inconvenience. This in itself might be sufficient to point to

where library closures and reductions in opening hours, staff, or stock would cause least inconvenience to the public.