

**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.

Barnet residents concerned with democracy and good government invited The Research Practice to conduct research to assess the public's response to the consultation booklet and the questionnaire. The Research Practice has been conducting research for major institutions and companies, both nationally and internationally, for over 25 years.

The **research objective** was to explore the public's

- understanding of the consultation booklet and questionnaire
- response to both documents and to completing the questionnaire
- perceptions of the proposed reforms as conveyed by the consultation documents.

Given the need for flexibility, sensitivity, and a diagnostic approach, a **qualitative methodology** was adopted. Given the detailed nature of the consultation documents, and the potential for findings to vary from person to person, it was felt that individual depth interviews represented the best interview format.

The research commenced with depth interviews amongst Barnet library users. In these interviews 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.

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 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 rather better suited to the time demands of the consultation process.

However even with respondents pre-reading the consultation documents before interview, the complexity of the consultation, and the numerous issues to which it gave rise, put time pressure on the interviews. It was therefore decided to include additional feedback from people who had previously been interviewed and who had since had more time to peruse the consultation documents and to reflect on the consultation process. This helpfully yielded an additional level of response based on

more prolonged reflection. It was also decided to include feedback from people who had responded to the questionnaire before being contacted by the research company.

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 it gives rise to unanswered questions, 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 the relevant 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, in a real life situation, they persevere and manage to submit a questionnaire, they seem likely to unwittingly endorse propositions with which they do not necessarily agree. This is because members of the public feel under pressure to fill in the questionnaire even if they do not fully understand the questions they are being asked.

"I filled it in to the best of my ability but I wasn't always sure what some of the questions meant exactly and I felt I had to choose one of the Options so I chose the one I thought was the least worst."

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."

Respondents' comprehension difficulties reflected the fact that they found it difficult to think of the library service as a whole, i.e., in terms of the full branch network and all the services offered. It was more natural for respondents to think in terms of the particular branches and services they personally used. Beyond this limited personal experience, they had little awareness or knowledge of the overall service. Hence

respondents' overall approach to the consultation was often driven by what the proposals meant for the particular branch or services they used.

"It's very difficult to compare these things because there are branches I know nothing about, and so I don't really know. I can't really say whether some of them should close. I don't know them. It would have been easier if the consultation was asking me about my library and how I use it or would like to use it.

"I saw that the library I use (Chipping Barnet) was like their star library and it wasn't going to close ... so I thought well I'm going to be alright so I didn't feel inclined to read any further or fill all this in."

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."

"But if they close libraries or shrink them what happens to all the stock? Does it say anywhere?"

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.”

As respondents went to and fro between the consultation booklet and the questionnaire, and considered the consultation more broadly, they felt that contradictory language and business jargon within the documents also contributed to unnecessary confusion and complexity.

“It starts by saying we really need to cut the service, to make savings, to close branches and then it talks about building spanking new ‘fit for the purpose’ libraries and extending the service, and it’s a bit all over the place.”

“It’s saying the libraries will be cut and then it is suggesting they will be improved and it’s not clear.”

“It’s been dressed up in business jargon to give it a positive spin but it doesn’t make it any easier to follow. Words like ‘alternative delivery models’ suggest to me the service will be provided in a different way, for example on-line rather than in branches but here it’s referring to who runs the libraries. So why not just say that, and keep it simple.”

4. Reaction to Part One of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire prompted far more difficulties and complaints than the consultation booklet. Respondents found it longwinded and confusingly constructed.

Part One appeared to be the only part of the questionnaire that respondents were obliged to complete. Analysis of this part 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 in Part One 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?”

As reported in the previous section of this document (i.e., 'Reaction to the Consultation Booklet'), respondents' natural inclination was to think about the particular branches and services they personally used. Beyond this, they had little knowledge of the service as a whole. So when presented with questions about Barnet's overall library system they did not feel they were in a position to answer with much authority. This led to confusion as to whether one should respond to such questions in terms of one's own limited experience and local branch, or whether one was being asked what would be appropriate for the service as a whole. In practice respondents' answers to such questions were often driven solely by their personal experience of the one or two branches or services that they used.

“The only way I can answer is in terms of the two branches I use. So I’m writing that beside the questions and I hope that is the right thing to do.”

“I’m answering these in relation to my library because that’s what I know and that’s really all I’m bothered about.”

“I voted for Option 3 because Option 2 closes my branch.”

In places the questionnaire asked people to comment on issues that, as ordinary members of the public, they did not feel qualified to answer. It was suggested that answers to some questions (Q4-Q7 & Q17-Q19) needed to be assessed in the context of detailed financial information, data on library usage patterns and public demand, 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..”

“This (Q6) is really too much. I can’t rank each day in terms of importance. Doesn’t it depend on how many people go each day, and at what time? It says you can read the ‘Options Paper’ whatever that is, but the booklet (the consultation booklet) is bad enough.”

“I just borrow books so I don’t know if the library should maintain or increase the e-books or on-line service (Q19). Are there many people using those services?”

Other questions (e.g., Q15, Q13, etc) were also felt to require specialist knowledge of a different nature in order to respond with confidence.

“I don’t think I know enough about these alternatives (Q15) to choose between them. Wouldn’t there be all sorts of issues if they were run by charitable providers or commercial ones?”

Some questions (e.g., Q11) 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.”

“I’ve read through this (Q11) several times and I can’t make any sense of it.”

As reported in the previous section of this document (i.e., ‘Reaction to the Consultation Booklet’), respondents found it confusing that the consultation combined proposals for cuts with positive ideas about extending opening hours, enhancing library services and building new ‘fit for the purpose’ libraries. This confusion was evident as respondents struggled with the questionnaire.

“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.”

Reactions to Parts Two and Three of the Questionnaire

Time constraints meant that relatively little time was spent on Parts Two and Three of the questionnaire. The text box with white lettering on a black background at the end of Part One of the questionnaire (just above Q27) implied to some that they did not need to complete Part Two or Part Three. This was received as welcome news because by this point in the interview most respondents were tired of trying to complete the questionnaire. But others, reading the same text box, wondered if they were supposed to fill in Part Three of the questionnaire.

“It seems to be saying that if you’ve got this far then you can stop and your answers are going to count. That’s how I read it.”

“Part Two is definitely optional but do I need to go to Part Three for my questionnaire to be valid? It’s sort of saying if you would like to go to Part Three then that would be of assistance.”

In the few interviews that covered people’s attempts to fill in Parts Two and Three, confusion continued.

“Did the people who compiled this know what they were doing? It says at the beginning that your personal data will be protected but then it never asks you to identify yourself, to say who you are. Also it says (at Q27) you either fill in part Two or Part Three but definitely not both. That’s what I understood by ‘please cross one box only’ even though I couldn’t see the reason for it. Why would they not want you to fill in both? I filled in Part Two because I thought that would be more useful. But at the end (of Part Two) it tells you to fill in Part Three which seems to contradict question 27.”

“It (Q33) asks me what day I most use the library but I don’t keep a record.”

I’m supposed to cross one box only for what day and what time I use the library (Q33 and Q34) but I use two libraries and would go to each on a different day and at a different time so how do I answer?

“I can’t really answer this (Q41) because the two libraries I use are very different in character.”

Respondents Overall Views on the Consultation

Ultimately respondents felt that the questionnaire gave them little scope to express their own views. After struggling with the consultation booklet for about an hour, and with the questionnaire for up to two hours, some concluded that the whole consultation process was disingenuous or a ‘con’. Such views were particularly common amongst those who gave additional feedback after their initial interview and who had had more time to reflect on the consultation process. 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.

“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.”

“I’m sure that the libraries do need reforming and that this isn’t the way to go about it.”

“Personally I don’t care that much. Especially as the library I use would not be affected. But judging by the local papers some people are very concerned so if the Council don’t get this right it will lead to resentment.”

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.

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

“It makes me angry that money that should be spent on front line services are being wasted on something like this.”

“It’s a disgrace that our time is being wasted on this sort of thing. It’s abusive to the public. The proposed Options seem bad enough, but this consultation is like the Council forcing dog poo down your throat.”

However others seemed resigned to the idea that disingenuous consultations were just a part of modern meaningless bureaucracy and exhibited little emotion.

“I’ve never been able to fill in a questionnaire from Barnet Council.”

“I think lot of Councils are like this. It’s modern bureaucracy, completely mindless.”

“I see the same sort of thing at work. Complete nonsense.”

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

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.

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

The current consultation documents are unnecessarily confusing and wasteful of respondents’ time. The questionnaire is also badly constructed and does not obey market research norms. For example, the questionnaire does not ask respondents to identify themselves, which potentially invites misbehaviour. People are therefore free to submit multiple questionnaires in which they have placed crosses in the appropriate boxes in order to achieve the results they seek.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the consultation has been designed to deter response and to steer people into endorsing the council’s plans.