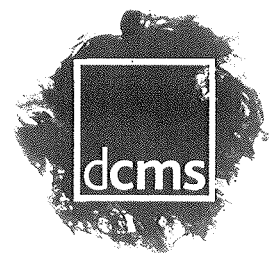


CMS 214722/DC

Councillor Cliff Morris  
Leader of Bolton Council  
Care of Members' Secretariat  
Town Hall  
Bolton  
BL1 1RU



department for  
culture, media  
and sport

3 September 2012

Dear Councillor Morris

Local inquiry into library provision in the Metropolitan Borough of Bolton

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 Bolton. 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, London, SW1Y 5DH or by email to [enquiries@culture.gov.uk](mailto: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 receiving information about the effect of the library closures that have occurred to date, including for example current usage figures, and the operation and use of the community collection scheme. 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.



improving  
the quality  
of life for all

## 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 resources 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:

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

- The advantages of local decision making by expert and democratically accountable local representatives.
- 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

Bolton Council has closed 5 of the 15 libraries in the council area. 10 Council run libraries remain open, spread across the area. Bolton Council's figures indicate that 87% of active borrowers used the remaining 10 libraries, 42% using the Central Library. For example, in February 2012 half term week, there were 11,000 separate visits to the Central Library. Some of the other closed libraries would take many months to see similar use.

Bolton Council's figures indicate that 33-45% of users in the closed libraries were already using other libraries before the closures. There has been a modest increase in the opening hours of the Central Library (from 60 to 65 hours per week), which is by far the most heavily used library. Other libraries have had opening hours maintained or subject to modest reductions.

The effect of the library closures has been mitigated by a number of local neighbourhood collection sites where books can be borrowed and ordered. There also remains a home library service for the disabled. The neighbourhood collection scheme will be reviewed at six, twelve and eighteen months.

Despite requests, no imminently workable community bids were made to run the closed libraries.

Prior to the closures, MBB carried out a consultation process. 3,824 responses were received during the initial consultation period in early 2011, and a second period of consultation, involving random sampling methods aimed at achieving feedback based on a fully representative sample of Bolton residents took place later in 2011. The consultations indicated that there was little local appetite for a volunteer run service.

Another local issue that has been considered is that of travel time. MBB believes that post-closures, 96% of the population will be within 2 miles of a library, and that almost the entire borough is within 20 minutes journey of a library by public transport, plus walking time to the nearest bus stop. Car ownership is also high in Bolton and other transport services are provided for the elderly and disabled. The Secretary of State views this as sufficient to provide a comprehensive and efficient service.

The Secretary of State's current view is that MBB continues to offer a comprehensive and efficient library service. There remain a substantial number of council run libraries across the Bolton area. Opening hours have been maintained or improved in many cases, and reductions in other cases have only been modest. 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 on the material issues in this matter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Vaizey', is centered on the page.

**Ed Vaizey MP**  
**Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries**