



# Department for Culture Media & Sport

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Sir Steve Bullock  
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Our Ref: CMS 228663/asg  
15 April 2013

Dear Sir Steve

## **Local inquiry into library provision in the London Borough of Lewisham**

The Secretary of State has considered whether to intervene by directing an inquiry under the Museums and Libraries Act 1964 into the changes in the library provision in the London Borough of Lewisham. The Secretary of State has decided not to direct a local inquiry for the reasons set out below.

On 3 September 2012, the Secretary of State decided that he was not minded to direct an inquiry under the 1964 Act, but invited comments and representations.

Written representations were received from the Mayor of Lewisham (on behalf of the London Borough of Lewisham) and the Users and Friends of Manor House Library.

### Principles

The Secretary of State has considered the duty of a local authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient service under section 7 of the 1964 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 authority to make. It has good 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 ordinarily be taken by democratically elected local representatives accountable to local voters.



The duty of the Secretary of State is one of superintendence. A wide range of approaches were open to the local authority 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 cost in deciding whether a proposal is efficient.

The Secretary of State seeks to promote and secure the proper discharge of the statutory duties on local authorities. She has power to direct a local inquiry. Her approach in deciding whether she is minded to intervene to direct an inquiry has been to ask herself whether, having regard to the duties on her and the local authority, there is good reason in all the circumstances for her to direct an inquiry at the present time.

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 Lewisham is (or may cease to be) complying with its legal obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.
- Whether Lewisham appears to be acting in a careless or unreasonable way.
- Whether the decision is or may be outside the proper bounds of Lewisham's discretion, such as a decision to stop serving a particularly vulnerable group.
- Whether Lewisham, 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, and inadequate public consultation and discussion of proposals. The converse is also true.
- The advantages of local decision making by democratically accountable local representatives.
- The cost and delay of an inquiry.
- 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 or discouraging 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.

### Facts

As noted in the 'minded to' letter, the library changes in Lewisham have involved the transfer of five libraries to be run by the local community, leaving seven borough run static libraries, supplemented by a service for housebound people and online library services. The seven remaining borough run libraries are at Catford, Deptford, Downham, Forest Hill, Lewisham, Manor House and Torridon Road. The library in Deptford ("Wavelengths") closed in September 2011 but reopened as part of the Deptford Lounge site, with greatly extended opening hours.

Local groups have stepped in to run five libraries (Blackheath Village, Crofton Park, Grove Park, New Cross and Sydenham). They remain open and represent a valuable resource for residents of Lewisham. All but one of the community libraries have increased opening hours. However, early figures showed a substantial drop in numbers of visits to the community libraries from May 2011 onwards (down around 70% in June 2011). Since then, the number of visits has improved, other than in Blackheath Village which was due to move to improved premises. However, as at June 2012, the number of books issued remained lower and had not recovered.

At the seven borough libraries, opening hours have been maintained or improved. At the Deptford Lounge (replacing the Wavelengths library) opening hours have been improved from 53 hours/week to 85 hours/week, which is an excellent service. This new library is the product of substantial capital investment and is in a location with good transport links. The Downham library is also open 80 hours/week. Catford Bridge continues to open 54 hours week, Forest Hill, Lewisham and Manor House retain opening hours of 66, 61 and 65 hours per week respectively. Opening hours at Torridon Road have been improved from 33.5 hours/week to 36 hours. In 2009-10, 83% of pre-transfer library visits and 77% of book issues were to the 7 remaining borough libraries. Had the Deptford Lounge been open in place of Wavelengths library, this figure probably would have been higher. The libraries that were transferred to community provision were comparatively little used.

Lewisham has also joined the London Libraries Consortium, giving residents access to a large number of other libraries and stock across London.

The London Borough of Lewisham carried out a public consultation prior to the changes.

### Consultation responses

Two responses were received to the 'minded to' letter.

The London Borough of Lewisham provided an update on the current position. In summary:

- The five community libraries remain open. In three cases, the building has been leased to a third party. In one case, the lease has been re-assigned. In the final case, there is a tenancy at will. The local community organisations now responsible for the libraries have started providing new activities in the buildings.
- The Council views these libraries, and the support it provides to them, as part of its statutory services and provision. It notes that it remains responsible for owning and maintaining the book stock, the self-service technology in them and the training and support of local volunteers.
- Between April and September 2012, visits to the community libraries increased by 33.5%, but issues were down by 35.4%. The Council thinks this is likely to be due to visitors reading at the library, and taking advantage of the better facilities there (e.g. cafes). It is also a result of the library at Blackheath moving, which has since been completed.

- Between April and September 2012, visits at the main borough run libraries increased by 1% and issues increased by 7.4% (despite substantial closures at Catford).
- The new library at Deptford Lounge has been successful. It has around 28,000 visits and 10,000 issues per month, which is 160% of the library it replaced. Visits are up 97% since April compared to the previous year.

The Users and Friends of Manor House Library (one of the remaining borough run libraries) also provided a response. In summary:

- The library service in Lewisham is now fragmented, and is not as accessible, with the same level of trained staff or level of stock.
- There are real concerns over the risks attached to the leases to the community library operators, especially Eco Computer Systems Limited.
- Lewisham is a deprived borough. It deserves a better level of library provision.
- The future of the community libraries cannot be guaranteed as they are dependent on grants, fund-raising, donations, the success of Eco Computer Systems Limited and the constant replenishment and training of volunteers.

The Friends also provided a helpful analysis of visit and issue figures.

### Decision

The Secretary of State has decided not to order a local inquiry. Not every alteration in library provision will justify a costly local inquiry and the uncertainty that it brings. In the present case, the Secretary of State's view is that on balance an inquiry is not appropriate. The Secretary of State's duty is one of superintendence. A local issue is being properly and fairly handled by the borough. The Secretary of State's intervention to direct an inquiry is not currently required.

For the purposes of her assessment as to whether to order a local inquiry, the Secretary of State has based her view solely on the seven borough-run libraries, and the home library service. The community service has not been taken into account, although it appears to be successful and to form an important part of borough life. One local library group has suggested that the community libraries may not be sustainable in the long-term, but these representations were from a user group of a core library. Accordingly, if the community service were to be taken into account, it would only reinforce the Secretary of State's view.

The Secretary of State has also noted the absence of any response from residents in areas where libraries have been taken over by community groups.

In the view of the Secretary of State it is clear that Lewisham continues to offer a comprehensive and efficient library service through its core libraries. Visits and issues remain stable in the core libraries, and the performance of the new flagship library at the Deptford Lounge has been particularly impressive, justifying the significant investment in

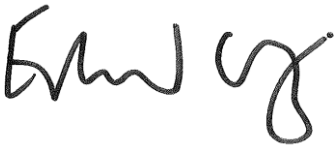
the new facility. Deptford Lounge receives visits greatly in excess of those to the library it replaced, Wavelengths, and there has been a smaller increase in issues. The context in which such visitor and issue figures ought to be viewed is the maintenance of the community libraries.

At the same time as this substantial investment in the Deptford Lounge, the borough have been able to maintain the other 6 borough run libraries and assist the running of the remaining 5 libraries as community facilities. No libraries have closed.

The transfers to community libraries were based on a library review. There was a fair public consultation and a detailed Equality Impact Assessment. Proper provision has been made for vulnerable groups.

Finally, the core libraries are accessible – Lewisham is an urban area with a good public transport network. Bus travel is free for under 16s, over 60s and people with disabilities. The remaining libraries are well located. There does not need to be equal or blanket coverage across a local authority area.

In these circumstances, the Secretary of State has decided that there is no good reason in all the circumstances to order a local inquiry.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Vaizey'.

**Ed Vaizey MP**

Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries