



Department for  
Digital, Culture,  
Media & Sport

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Councillor Jack Hopkins  
Leader  
Lambeth Council  
Lambeth Town Hall  
1 Brixton Hill  
London SW2 1RW

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3 June 2020

Dear Councillor Hopkins

### Local inquiry into library provision in Lambeth

1. The Secretary of State has considered whether to intervene by directing an inquiry under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 (“the Act”) into the changes in the library provision in Lambeth. He has decided not to direct a local inquiry for the reasons set out below.
2. On 27 February 2020, I wrote to you to inform you that the Secretary of State had decided that he was not minded to direct an inquiry under the Act (“the minded to letter”), but invited further representations before taking a final decision.
3. The background and general principles which are relevant to this decision are set out in “the minded to letter”, which should be read in conjunction with this letter.
4. As explained in the minded to letter, it is the duty of the Secretary of State to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities and secure the proper discharge of the duties conferred on local authorities under the Act. A wide range of approaches are open to the local authority when deciding how to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. It is not the function of the Secretary of State to substitute his opinion for that of the democratically accountable local authority. The question which the Secretary of State must consider is whether the LC library service, as revised by the changes agreed by its Cabinet on 12 October 2015, there is any serious doubt or uncertainty as to whether the local authority is (or may cease to be) complying with its legal obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.
5. The Secretary of State may intervene by directing a local inquiry following a complaint that a local authority has failed to carry out its duties under the Act, or of his own motion. His approach in deciding whether to direct an inquiry has been to ask himself whether, having regard to the duties on him and the local authority, there is good reason in all the circumstances for him to direct an inquiry at the present time.

6. Before reaching a decision in this case the Secretary of State carefully considered and weighed relevant factors. They included:
- Whether the local authority appears to be acting in a careless or unreasonable way.
  - Whether the decision is or may be outside the proper bounds of the local authority's discretion, such as a capricious decision to stop serving a particularly vulnerable group in the local community.
  - Whether the local authority appears to have failed to consult affected individuals or to carry out significant research into the effects of its proposals.
  - Whether the local authority has failed to explain, analyse or properly justify its proposals.
  - Whether local proposals are likely to lead to a breach of national library policy.
  - The advantages of local decision making by expert and democratically accountable local representatives.
  - Whether there is any further good reason why a local inquiry should be ordered.

#### Library changes in Lambeth

7. The library changes in Lambeth approved by LC's Cabinet on 12 October 2015 together with other changes has resulted in a revised statutory library service provision. In summary, the Secretary of State understands that the statutory service comprises 10 static libraries; a home visit service; and deposit collections in residential settings such as care homes, plus one in a tearoom in the south of the borough.
8. LC has retained 10 static libraries all of which remain part of the statutory service and apart from Waterloo library (which has been relocated nearby) they remain in the same locations. LC has also introduced self service at three neighbourhood libraries (Minet, Upper Norwood and Waterloo) resulting in the overall increase in library opening hours across the library network. In addition, four libraries have increased the number of days they are open per week and overall opening hours at libraries have been revised to better reflect the level of library usage.

#### Further representations

9. Only one response received was expressed as a representation to the minded to letter. The response repeated matters which were previously considered by the Secretary of State when he determined that he was not minded to direct an inquiry under the 1964 Act.

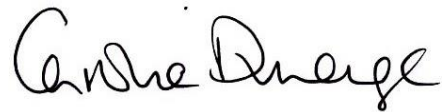
#### Decision

10. The Secretary of State's duty is one of superintendence and 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 an inquiry is not appropriate.
11. The specific question which the Secretary of State must consider is whether the statutory library service provision, after implementation of LC's proposals, comprising 10 static libraries; a home visit service; and deposit collections in residential settings such as care homes, plus one in a tearoom in the south of the borough is comprehensive and efficient.
12. The Secretary of State has considered the additional representation and notes the criticisms raised, which are summarised as follows:
- a lack of meaningful involvement of residents in the consultation with residents not having the chance to choose what would happen to their library service
  - the outcome of consultation was predetermined

- failure of the Council to disclose their discussions and agreement with Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) for three neighbourhood libraries to be part of healthy living centres
  - major changes resulting in reductions in the library service provision
13. He notes these criticisms are similar to those raised by the original complainants and that those criticisms were carefully considered against the factors listed on page 2. The Secretary of State considers that they do not raise any new arguments or provide any additional detail which is relevant to the factors considered by him when determining whether to direct an inquiry under the 1964 Act.
  14. The Secretary of State also notes the criticism that LC did not disclose their discussions and agreement with GLL. The decision to engage with GLL or any other delivery partner in respect of the library service is a matter for LC as democratically accountable local representatives. The Secretary of State considers that it is for LC to ensure they have in place appropriate processes and governance structures to enable robust and well considered decisions to be taken and that such arrangements are within the proper bounds of LC's discretion. The question for the Secretary of State is whether the library service provision, after implementation of LC's proposals, is comprehensive and efficient.
  15. The Secretary of State considers in the absence of no new material having been provided that the conclusions detailed in "the minded to letter" remain.
  16. The Secretary of State notes the reduction of three hours per week in staffed hours across the library network and recognises that LC made changes to the original proposals in response to consultation feedback. He also considers that LC reasonably considered alternative options. He notes that LC sought to engage directly with representative groups that could be affected by the changes and made reasonable efforts to reduce the impact upon groups of residents that may be more adversely impacted. He is also satisfied that LC gave due regard to its statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. LC has retained 10 static libraries, as part of the statutory service, and has increased total weekly opening hours across the library network with the introduction of self service at three neighbourhood libraries. He further recognises that LC has increased the number of days per week libraries are open at four static locations and notes that LC has revised overall weekly opening hours at libraries to better reflect the level of library usage.
  17. The Secretary of State is satisfied that LC's library provision offers a comprehensive and efficient service. The Secretary of State does not consider that there is any serious doubt or uncertainty that the library services provided, based on the overall model of 10 static libraries; a home visit service; and deposit collections in residential settings such as care homes, plus one in a tearoom in the south of the borough is comprehensive and efficient to justify holding an inquiry.

18. The Secretary of State does not believe there to be any other good reason why an inquiry should be ordered. However, he recognises that the duties under the Act are ongoing, and will continue to monitor the Council's compliance with its duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service in the same way as with any other library authority.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Caroline Dinenage". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C'.

**Caroline Dinenage MP**  
Minister of State for Digital and Culture