

Highams Park Planning Group comments on council officers' document 'Appendix 2a Hale End Business Case 1st July 2016'

The notes below have been prepared by The Highams Park Planning Group (HPPG), The Highams Park Forum (HPF) and The Highams Park Society (HPS) in response to documents prepared by council officers recommending the sale of the Hale End Library building in Highams Park. The notes have been prepared to advise councillors and residents of inaccuracies and misleading statements. The notes also demonstrate how facts that fit the recommendations have been included in the officers' report and facts that don't fit have been excluded. The notes here, have of necessity, been produced as a preliminary review due to the short time available between publication of the report and the Cabinet meeting which will consider the report. We will create a fuller more considered report prior to the public consultation if the Cabinet decides to follow the council officers' recommendations. The references in brackets at the end of some of the paragraphs refer to the relevant part of the Council document.

Other Sites Considered and the Lease Break Clause: Waltham Forest Council firmly intends that all four Library Locals will remain in operation alongside the four Library Plus' but there are no guarantees. (see 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY).

The other locations considered (the Regal Building and the disused Budgens' Building) are not realistic options. Both of are privately owned and the owners would expect commercial rents. The Regal building is dilapidated and would cost a huge amount of money and considerable time to refurbish. The Budgens' building is larger than the existing building and would need substantial modifications to be made suitable. Given the Council is short of financial resources we would suggest that these were never realistic options and to include them in the report is misleading (see 5.1.1.).

We note that the council officers express concern that the lease rentals may be too expensive for the new location of the library to viable in the medium term and have recommended that a break clause should be included in the lease. Given the lack of other suitable sites for the library and the proposal to redevelop the existing library building, if the lease has to be cancelled at a future date there is unlikely to be a suitable site for the library to be relocated. So there is a very high future risk that the Council will be locked into a very high rental or will be forced to close the library in the near future (see 5.1.3.).

Appendix 8 of the report is not available to us to review because it is commercially sensitive: This appendix should contain the figures which show how the capital receipts from the sale of the existing library are to be used and how the proposed new library will be funded. There are strict accounting rules in place over local authorities which restrict how they can use capital from the sale of assets to fund revenue (such as ongoing rental). Without seeing appendix 8, it is not clear whether the proposal is able (under the rules) to utilise any capital to fund the ongoing rental, and if it can, how long will the funds last. If it is not able to utilise any of the capital receipts, how will the rental of the new library be funded ad infinitum without incurring an increasing burden on council tax? We are very concerned about this since it puts the long term viability of the library in doubt.

The report mentions a restrictive covenant on the building which might put off potential purchasers. The report suggests that insurance may be used to increase purchaser confidence. What is this covenant and why is the Council comfortable to overturn it so lightly?

Transportation and disabled parking: The report states several times that there are "no bus routes" running past the library, this is untrue as both the 275 and 675 routes do pass the library (the 675 is a school bus). The report claims the 275 route runs past the Tesco site when it does not. The report also claims the 672 runs past the Tesco site when it does not (see BACKGROUND 5.1.1.)

The report implies that the building in Signal Walk will be more accessible but the existing library is actually more accessible as it has what is known as an Access Index of 8.89 with the Town Square site slightly lower at 8.84, due to the longer walking distance from the station. Public Transport Accessibility Level (PTAL) scores for both sites is 2 but the officers' report claims the Tesco site is 3.

Disabled parking at Hale End Library is right next to the rear entrance of the library. This entrance goes straight into the lending area with no steps. At the Tesco site the disabled parking is much further away. This is not mentioned in the officers' report. The distances are, from the edge of the disabled bays to the nearest door at both sites, taking the most direct route:

Current Library: Distance from disabled bays = 18m

Proposed site near Tesco: Distance from disabled bays = 63m

It can be expected that this might excluding some disabled residents access to the proposed site. The report makes an issue of the fact that there are 3 disabled bays at Hale End Library compared to "Many" at the Tesco site, if that is an issue then more disabled bays could easily be added at Hale End's good sized car-park.(see 5.1.1.).

Location: There are distance inaccuracies in the report. Hale End Library is 0.09miles (146m) away from Highams Park Station, not "0.2" (321m) miles as claimed in the report.

The report states that Hale End Library is on a residential street. Its postal address is 'Castle Avenue' which is a residential street but the library is actually on a corner location with its main frontage on The Avenue which is a busy thoroughfare and one of four main shopping streets in Highams Park. This is a clear misrepresentation of the library's location. This report repeatedly attempts to make it sound like the library is further away than it actually is. (see 2. BACKGROUND)

The report claims the Tesco site is in the "heart of the community" but the proposed library is no nearer or farther from the centre of Highams Park than the current building. Hale End Library is safer to get to from the centre of Highams Park as a zebra crossing is available to use. To get from the centre to the Tesco site, two main roads need to be crossed, one with an island only, the other with a zebra crossing which is a car's length from the junction of those two roads.

The shopping centre is not in the geographic centre of Highams Park. Large numbers of Highams Park Residents live to the east of the library and so walk past it every day on the way to the station. Those same people will not walk past the Tesco site.

The majority of Highams Park's schools are closer to the existing library and the walking route is far easier and safer.

The reference to Signal Walk as the "Town Square" is misleading is not a term used by any residents that we are aware off, gatherings are normally by the Millennium Clock by the station. (see 5.1.1.).

Library Usage: The report claims that "engagement with the [library] service will remain low" but current usage figures do not measure footfall into and out of the building for those people not borrowing books. During the day the computers, wifi, and desks are well used and during revision periods the library is very busy. School children use the library for home work and will not be recorded in the statistics. Many local people also use it as a hub for seeking employment and research (see 3. The Council should do nothing).

Current library hours are one of the main reasons for the drop in attendance. The library is closed 3 days a week and never opens in the evenings. The library is essentially inaccessible to working people except on a Saturday and it is closed during the time of the huge footfall of commuters that pass it each day on the way to the station. The proposal for the new library does not include any change in opening hours.

The Highams Park Planning Group have proposals to better distribute existing opening hours throughout the week to remedy this problem in the current library location. It is possible to create a pattern of opening that has the library open 6 days a week with some evening opening too. Commuters returning home on foot would pass a lit up and open library several times a week and would be able to pop in (having seen portable signage by the pavement, promoting events). Library opening would be more consistent and less confusing (people would know it is always open in the afternoon, every day except Sunday). It would cater better for children after school by being open every day. It would make evening use of the community rooms easier/cheaper because staff would be present in the evening 3 days a week.

Highams Park has an extensive network of community groups and their members have expertise across the whole educational spectrum which they would be willing to share. The library user group has for many years tried to encourage officers to engage with those groups to fully utilise the community rooms, the library space itself, and the car park. A myriad of learning opportunities could be provided at low or zero cost. These proposals were not dynamically embraced by council officers. In recent years, approaches to use the library on closed days for resident led activities have been stalled by council officers on multiple instances for reasons unclear. A resident-led and very popular Silver Surfers Club was running on closed library days with no problems,

using a resident as keyholder. For unspecified reasons, early in 2016, council officers withdrew out of hours use and the club was forced to close. Low usage of the facilities is not a reflection of demand. There is a demand for more space not less.

The report states that footfall will increase by 20% at the new site but omits to mention that the proposed location of the library is actually on a route which could be described as being similar to a 'dead end' in what has essentially been a relatively unsuccessful retail development that has much less passing footfall than the current location of the library. (see 5.1.1.).

The report does not mention the fact that the existing library has an enclosed and attractive car park which could be used for community activities and learning opportunities flowing out from the library.

The report states that computer usage at Hale End Library has been falling, this is very likely a result of computers in the library being about ten years old (they were installed during the 2007 refurbishment). Library users are now much more likely to have handheld devices and just be using the library's wifi. (see 5.1.1.)

The report states that library usage has fallen since 2010/11 this is quite clearly due to the fact the libraries hours were significantly reduced. Hundreds of commuters pass by the library twice a day, few of whom are able to access the library when passing as the latest it is open is 6pm. Moving the library to the proposed site moves the library further away from all the local schools except for one which would be only slightly closer. It is also significantly safer for pupils to reach the current site, especially visually impaired children at Joseph Clarke School. Highams Park has Highams Park Senior School, Handsworth and Oak Hill Primary Schools, Handsworth Nursery, two day care Nurseries, Joseph Clarke School and The Doctors Surgery all in close proximity to the library. Only Selwyn Primary School would benefit from the move to the new site in terms of safety and distance.

Library Space: The report states that the current library is "too large" yet the proposed library site would be too small under the Council's own guidelines for Library Locals. Current library space is 570sq metres, proposed site only 350sq metres. (see 5.3.1.).

The report states that the current library's design is "inflexible", but when the library was refurbished in 2007 one of the main changes provided that flexibility to the library. All of the bookcases can be wheeled around so a much larger event/activity space can easily be created in minutes. (see 2. BACKGROUND). The design also allows the community rooms to be accessed completely separately from the lending area, allowing the rooms to be safely opened while the lending area is closed.

The report argues that the "strength of each individual business proposal be considered in conjunction with the other three libraries". The report also states that those other three libraries all require "extensive and costly repairs" while acknowledging that Hale End Library does not. **The future of Hale End Library should not be determined on the basis that the other three libraries are in a poor condition** (see 2. BACKGROUND).

Other than the dilapidated computers 'The Library Local's Vision Statement' is fully met by the Hale End Library: it is modern and attractive, flexible, offers a 21st Century library service, and is in an accessible space which is located alongside other community facilities. (see 2. BACKGROUND).

Library Hours: The reports says that library hours will be increased to 60 hours per week but library hours will remain the same, out of hours community led activities are being added to inflate the library hours total. This is very misleading and may lead people to think we are returning to a full-time library service.

Impact on Local Businesses: The report does not mention the loss of footfall to local businesses. The Highams Park shopping centre consists of a number of "arms" radiating out from the level crossing. Encouraging people to explore each arm is important to the viability of the shopping area. The library acts as positive anchor destination at the end of The Avenue arm. The 27 shops, businesses, cafes and restaurants (including a bookshop which focuses on children's books) in this arm may suffer if this attractive anchor destination is removed.

Refurbishment Option: The report claims that "Significant refurbishment is needed to transform Hale End Library" and will provide residents with:

- 1.Space for sitting, browsing, study and circulation.
2. A space for ICT provision (which can overlap with study space).
3. Areas identified for flexible, multi-purpose use by all ages.
4. Clear branding.

The only thing Hale End Library doesn't already have at the moment is clear branding and modern ICT. The vast majority of the furniture in the building is only nine years' old and, as stated above, the library received major refurbishment just 9 years ago. The library used to have hanging banners on lamp posts to advertise its position but these were removed for reasons unknown. The library does not have any portable signage (e.g. a small "A frame" board to advertise its offerings and events to passing residents) despite regular requests from the library user group. (see 5.3.2)

The report states that "The current design of Hale End Library is somewhat out-dated and unwelcoming and resident satisfaction has been affected as a result". This is not correct, a simple survey of residents, or a site visit, would clearly show otherwise. (see 5.3).

The report is clearly exaggerating the refurbishment required.