

# STRATEGY FOR ENHANCED COMMUNITY USE OF THE EXISTING HALE END LIBRARY

27 July 2016

## SUMMARY



# STRATEGY FOR ENHANCED COMMUNITY USE OF HALE END LIBRARY IN ITS CURRENT BUILDING

## SUMMARY

Hale End Library has been on its current site for over 80 years. Both physically and psychologically it is at the heart of the community. Libraries have evolved in the way they are used in that period. For many years there have been concerted efforts amongst local residents and the Library Users Group to enable our library to become a major community hub, providing a diverse range of services and activities for all our residents, an aim we know the Council shares.

We strongly believe that Hale End Library, with comparatively minimal additional investment, has the potential to become a jewel in Waltham Forest's 'Library Local' crown. Strengthening neighbourhoods and championing the cultural, educational, economic and digital lives of communities are significant responsibilities for a local authority. The Highams Park community is enthusiastic to support the Council in that role and to work with it to ensure innovative and progressive library provision of the highest quality.

### Why this particular building?

- The building is central to our aspirations. It is the area's last civic, secular building, providing a sense of cohesion in a changing community and the obvious centre for community events. Its perception locally as the civic centre made it the natural choice of local people for the siting of the memorial to local workers from the old Xylonite factory killed in the two World Wars.
- It is a purpose built building, of an ideal size for a broad range of community events and activities and has well designed, highly flexible space internally. In addition, there is a large private car park attached which could be utilised in a multitude of different ways, currently unrealised.
- It is in an ideal location within Highams Park. It is set back on a campus like site, in a quiet, leafy environment, so conducive to studious reflection, yet at the top of the main shopping street, close to the station, on a bus route, and in close proximity to four schools (around 2400 pupils), all of whom can reach the library without crossing any main roads.
- Long use has given it an aura no new building can possess. More than just books and banks of computers, it is a place where individuals gather to explore, interact, and imagine, in the footsteps of past generations.
- Hale End Library is a key asset of community value within Highams Park, as reflected in the huge support to retain it. The building's importance to the community on its current site is recognised in a policy of the nascent Highams Park Neighbourhood Plan (**Appendix 1**).
- A costly refurbishment to the building was carried out in 2007 (at around £1.2 million today in line with inflation); in the words of the application to the then Cabinet precisely because,

*The improvements to Hale End library will include increasing space open to the public and improving access to the building to enable it to meet Disability Discrimination Act standards. The plans will bring the first floor back into public use through the installation of a lift, thereby facilitating delivery of services such as adult education and community use. ... Improvements to Hale End Library will improve the environmental conditions of the library staff and **provide the community with a high quality public building to enjoy.***

Destroying the building less than 10 years after this refurbishment does not seem good financial housekeeping.

- The proposed alternative building will not be a civic building and is much smaller. It would take footfall away from the local shops which residents and the Council are working so hard to support and is not so close to most of our local schools.
- Real concerns exist as to how the long term use of the library can be sustained in a rented building that creates demands on future revenue streams. Rather than embarking on such an expensive and irreversible project, some inexpensive measures in the current location, as suggested in this document, would be far more appropriate.
- There is strong local opposition to the proposed move since the community would lose out on so many levels.
- It would seem better to look at the facilities and services of each local library and create a model to make best use of them rather than trying to change the buildings to fit the model.

## **Potential Activities**

A huge range of inclusive events and activities could be held in the current building's spaces, many of which could be delivered quickly with minimal support and which could bring in additional revenue and footfall for the library. Exciting future events are already being organised in the community and we should love to include the library and its staff in our plans. Details and some of the practicalities required are given in **Appendix 2**, along with clubs that local people would be willing to offer in the library rooms on a continuing basis. We should also like to consult with other successful community spaces in Walthamstow to learn from their experiences and make our proposals even stronger.

Our demographic includes an older population of significant size, many of whom rely on activities in public spaces such as libraries to counter feelings of isolation and loneliness. At the other end of the age spectrum, there is a considerable shortage of childcare places in Highams Park as a new generation of young families have moved into the area in recent years. There is huge potential for the building to be used for childcare provision of various sorts. The library is the only civic building available for such activities and currently has the only community toilets in Highams Park.

To be of maximum benefit to the community, we know it is important to appeal to all sections of that community and to engage with those who might not normally visit the library. In addition, it is important to help newcomers feel part of the community, to provide a place where families can connect with resources, learn new skills and meet new people. A new vibrancy in the community and increased feelings of neighbourliness have developed in the Highams Park over the last few

years. Community cohesion is immensely important and we want the library to play a key role in sustaining that momentum.

## **Priorities in Community Engagement**

We would recommend focusing on the following areas to gain maximum social and community benefit from the library. However, we would be happy to discuss priorities with the Council and Library Services.

### **1. Creating Employment, Education and Business Opportunities**

Highams Park has a growing creative community and we know from our local networks is a base for many home workers and freelancers. Currently there is no space for these groups to come together and work in an external environment, potentially building further networks. We should like to explore creating this in the upstairs space and have already spoken to a private consultancy with regard to having the library assessed as an enterprise space, subject to Council approval.

Already on the table is an offer from Birkbeck College, University of London for some of their students to run a law advisory clinic, a mutually beneficial project. The new head teacher at Highams Park School is keen for the pupils to become involved in the library and the community and ideas exist to assist our 3 primary schools, 2 special schools, nurseries and playgroups utilise the library more.

As the bookshelves are mobile, there is scope for large scale presentations or even concerts to be held on the ground floor. Educational activities can also take place in the spacious and enclosed car park along with car boot sales, for example, when the library is closed.

### **2. Engaging with NEETS and hard to reach groups**

The community is already increasing outreach to these groups through its Neighbourhood Planning Group. One aspect on which we would be keen to work with the Council is using the library's status as a central civic building to encourage colocation of services such as a Council Tax Paypoint, the ability to drop off parking permit applications, police drop in sessions and clinics from National Careers Service or Citizen Advice Bureau advisors. This approach already occurs in other Waltham Forest libraries and we think would be a real asset to the community.

In addition, there is a strong culture of volunteering in Highams Park and, depending on Council assessment of local need, we believe the library has great potential as a venue for local mentoring such as CV clinics and English Language classes.

### **3. Health and Well Being; Intergenerational knowledge sharing**

The flexible nature of the rooms would allow for activities such as Yoga, Pilates and counselling services. There are a number of people in the area running existing classes who would be interested in expanding into new ventures. We believe the flexible nature of the rooms would be perfect for this, and propose an Open Day or Evening for these groups to discuss the venue and explore opportunities.

The recent closure of the Silverthorne and Handsworth Baby Clinics has left the area without regular breastfeeding support and with reduced support from health visitors. We should be keen to discuss how the library could be used to address this with NELFFT.

We should like to reinvigorate the Silver Surfers club and explore how it could be used to build intergenerational links. Digital technology is an obvious area that can bring teens and older people together (knowledge will not just be one way). A knitting event is planned as part of the Highams Park Festival and transmitting knowledge of other traditional crafts by older members can be explored.

#### **4. Bonding the Community**

Our area has seen many changes in the past few years and shared activities are vital to help maintain the sense of community so many residents value. The flexible space downstairs allows for all manner of exhibitions. Local history and heritage displays would help create a sense of continuity and belonging. Bi-annual 'welcome meetings' for new residents could be arranged to tell them more about the area and how they can get involved with the community. Besides the Arts Festival, other major local events are regularly organised by the community, such as the Shop Local Day. An open, welcoming library can play a significant role in supporting these while promoting Council services at the same time. Space available means we can support the wider Waltham Forest community and library network where there is a shortage of rooms.

#### **5. Volunteering**

Although we strongly believe the community has neither the desire nor the capacity to provide a volunteer library service, there is a strong volunteering ethos that could be used to support the library in other ways. Annual clean ups of the library grounds would be well supported. Reliable volunteers could easily be found to be trained as key holders for out of hours sessions in the library, as has happened in the past. We are happy to facilitate everything necessary for new clubs and enterprises, working with the Library Services. We have the means to organise the bookings, have already had meetings with library staff and until recently thought we had reached agreement for this to begin, with a volunteer who has the relevant experience to run the bookings.

We can support the library in publicising its services and events through the various Highams Park societies and social media groups and can resurrect the previous Library User Group as an active vector for change. We have recently launched a Highams Park local internet radio service and would love to base it in the library. Good marketing of services and events will play a major role in drawing all sections of the community into the library in greater numbers.

#### **6. Opening Hours**

Consultation with the community could establish more flexible opening hours that we believe would drive greater and more varied footfall at no increased cost; for example, ensuring that some evening opening is available for commuters who arrive home after 6 pm. A possible scenario is given in **Appendix 3**.

## Models to be explored

Successful community hubs run both in Waltham Forest and other areas. Members of our community are keen to learn all they can of how such success can be achieved. For example:

- We are in conversation with Wimbletech (<http://www.wimbletech.com>), who advise on transforming under-used library and public space.
- The Mill in Walthamstow (<http://themill-coppermill.org>) and The Old Manor Library in Wanstead (<http://createlondon.org/event/rabbits-road-institute>) are excellent prototypes from which to gain advice and ideas.

## In Conclusion

The ideas above reflect our enthusiasm for the Council priorities of:

- Keep your neighbourhood safe and clean
- Help to build a strong local economy and thriving town centre
- Help our residents afford a good quality of life (the library being free at point of use!)

We know the Council wishes to listen to the needs of the community and engage in genuinely meaningful collaboration to create a more holistic and imaginative approach to library services which is not wholly centred around books.

And finally, back to our well-loved building. A revered former Waltham Forest resident perhaps reflects our beliefs most eloquently:

*“It has been most truly said that these old buildings do not belong to us only; that they have belonged to our forefathers, and they will belong to our descendants unless we play them false. They are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those that come after us.”*

(William Morris 1889)

While ours is not “an old building”, the sense of the quote resonates with our desire to preserve the only council owned building as a civic centre in the heart of Highams Park in perpetuity. Our generation are just custodians, not owners. The building and the space it occupies could well be even more important to future generations, because we do not know the challenges and opportunities they will face.

Highams Park Planning Group  
July 2016

# Appendix 1

## Highams Park Neighbourhood Plan

### Draft

#### **Community Facilities Policy**

*"Development shall provide for and support a wide range of public, social and community facilities to meet the needs of a diverse and growing population. This shall be achieved by the provision of ...*

*9v. Protection of the building and expansion of facilities provided by Hale End Library".*

This initial draft policy was submitted to the Council's planning department as part of an initial outline plan for Highams Park in December 2014. Work is continuing on the Neighbourhood Plan following further consultations with residents and is expected to go to formal consultation later this year. Nascent policies in emerging neighbourhood plans are a material consideration in planning decisions as they reflect the wishes of the local residents.

## APPENDIX 2

### RECENT AND FUTURE COMMUNITY EVENTS IN THE LIBRARY

For the past few years we have been working with library staff towards increased access to the library facilities, particularly outside the hours it is currently manned. Although the Library is a two minute walk from the rail station and bus stops, the opening hours of 10 am to 6 pm mean that many commuters travelling to and from work are unable to access it when it is open.

In close walking distance are Highams Park Senior School, Handsworth and Oak Hill Primary Schools, Handsworth Nursery, two day care Nurseries, Joseph Clarke School for the visually impaired and the Health Centre. Although slightly further away, Selwyn Primary School is still in easy walking distance from the library.

We have an active community in Highams Park, and a vibrant artistic group. We have already embarked on a programme of exhibitions and events.

#### **LIBRARY FRONT WINDOW**

##### **Viking Exhibition**

Working with Wood Street Viking Shop residents put on a successful Viking weekend in The Highams Park, with Viking re-enactments watched by many hundreds of people.

In the library we exhibited a fully dressed manikin, with swords, shields, drinking horns, books and a mock up Viking ship. Drawings by local children of Viking Long Ships were shown. Unfortunately, the library was unable to source extra Viking books so we could run some children's workshops.

##### **Brett Banks Sculptures**

An excellent exhibition by Brett of his amazing work. He would have liked to do a workshop, showcasing sculpting techniques and how he makes his work. We were unable to obtain permission to do this in our library so he is doing it instead at the Quaker House in Wanstead.

### **Jenny L'Estrange Prints & Gill Roberts Pottery**

Our current exhibition of local artists. This has been a particularly successful exhibition.

### **Shakespeare in the Open Air**

We are working with the Greek Theatre who perform at Walthamstow Girls' School. We have used the back of The Forum notice board in the library for a display. We did want to arrange a larger exhibition around Shakespeare's 400<sup>th</sup> birthday but have been unable to do so without permission.

### **Highams Park Festival of Art and Culture**

A week long series of events was held in September. The library space played a major part, with exhibitions and information.

## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

### **hSpark Radio**

We are hoping to base hSpark Radio – launched at Highams Park Day on Saturday 16 July 2016 - at the library.

### **Schools**

We are currently talking to Highams Park School about community involvement. The new head is very keen. We have a whole list of ideas for Highams Park School, our 3 primary schools, nursery, playgroups and Joseph Clarke School for the visually impaired to make better use of the library facilities.

### **Other Community Use**

We want to offer our local small businesses classes and advice. A contact at Birkbeck College hopes to tie us in with their outreach programme to give advice on Basic Law. We also have a contact at City Lit who will help with Signing Classes.

### **Talks, Discussions and Clubs**

Highams Park is changing. There is a greater density of housing, and residents need a community asset that is a neutral environment to run clubs, have informative talks, watch films, take part in discussions about local issues and socialise, without it being in a pub, religious building or someone's house.

### **Possible clubs that volunteers are willing to run:**

Craft

Horticultural

Book clubs

Parent groups

STEM groups (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics)

Interest groups (music, art, heritage, discussion)

Educational improvement (basic reading and maths for adults)

Signing Classes

And many more

We are happy to facilitate all of the above, working with Library Services. We have access to the local area via social media and local groups to advertise and connect with people eager to be involved and to improve the access.



### **APPENDIX 3 ALTERNATIVE OPENING HOURS**

The present library hours may be one reason for falling use. Currently the library is closed on Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays and is never open beyond 6pm. The pattern below (and there are many other patterns we could come up with) uses just the 30 hours we have at the moment but redistributes them to achieve much greater use. These hours would have the following advantages:

- The library would be open every day except Sunday.
- 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 pupils wishing to study after school by being open every day.
- It would make evening use of the community rooms easier and cheaper because staff would be present in the evening 3 days a week.

Monday	2pm – 8pm	6 hours
Tuesday	2pm – 5pm	3 hours
Wednesday	2pm – 8pm	6 hours
Thursday	2pm – 5pm	3 hours
Friday	2pm – 8pm	6 hours
Saturday	10am – 4pm	6 hours
Sunday	Closed	

TOTAL:            30 hours

Residents would need to be consulted on the optimum pattern and council officers consulted to understand how/if a different pattern of hours has an impact on costs. Adjustments could be made accordingly.