

THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN MINI-CONFERENCE 24 October 2015

What did we do in Barnet?

Barnet Council is about to launch a second consultation on its plans for what it refers to as the future of the libraries, and most of us see as their demise.

The consultation on their first proposal, which included options for shrinkage, closures and volunteer-run libraries, was launched in November 2014.

Alasdair Hill, a Mill Hill resident, launched a petition on 38 Degrees to oppose the council's plans, and Barnet Alliance for Public Services and the East Finchley Library Users Group began collecting signatures on hard copies at weekend stalls.

We soon combined and drew other people into the Save Barnet Libraries group. We distributed many thousands of leaflets. One explained the proposals in simple, graphic terms, suggested how people should respond to the tricky questions in the survey – the ones in which all the choices were unacceptable – and urged them to write to their councillors and to the local papers.

We helpfully included a list of all the councillors. Letters supporting the libraries and opposing the council plans have appeared in both our two local papers almost every week, and occasionally in a neighbouring borough's local paper.

Another leaflet announced four fortnightly marches between groups of three and four libraries from March to May. It gathered a good-sized crowd of children and adults for each one.

We marched, we chanted, we carried placards and we handed out more leaflets to people we passed, inviting them to join the remaining marches. Local and not-so-local authors spoke when we stopped at each library.

The fourth march included an open-top double-decker bus, given for the day by the NUT, which we decorated with flags and banners. It followed the marchers, carrying anyone who wanted or needed to ride, while the London Metropolitan Brass Band led from the front.

On that march we distributed leaflets advising people how to keep the campaign alive over the summer and listed local events at which campaigners would be present.

Despite some bad weather forecasts, it was dry and even sunny during every march. The photographs were great and helped to ensure we got good press coverage every time, and excerpts appeared on YouTube.

The petition accumulated more than 10,000 signatures, and enabled Alasdair to make a 5-minute comment at the full council.

Gathering signatures was never easier; this is an issue that unites people across any political divide – except in the council. The leaflets and demos contributed to the fact that 3800 people took part in the consultation

– a much larger number than usual. A stunning 97% of them rejected all three of the council's options. A victory for the campaign, you might think.

We found out that the report of the consultation would be published at the end of July, and the committee would consider a revised proposal on 21 September, which was later moved to 12 October.

In preparation for that meeting, Save Barnet Libraries organised the Children's March for Libraries, a reprise of the last march, complete with bus and band. This time the bus was decorated with flags, banners and posters the children had drawn expressing their love for the libraries.

Ralph Vincent, a local 10-year-old who had written to the chair of the committee about his love for the library, spoke at the start of the march and led the 500 demonstrators – half of whom were children.

We had another leaflet and distributed 2,500 of them as we marched. It called for people to come to the Town Hall for the committee meeting that would discuss the revised proposal. Drivers slowed down and lowered their windows to take one as they passed us. It was another sunny day.

Campaigners distributed as many again outside schools, and handed out Save Our Libraries balloons and stickers.

We know that leaflets taken, even if they are read, do not always translate into action, so we were pleased when well over 100 people assembled in front of the Town Hall on the 12th, to make their voices heard.

By that time we had read the new proposal and identified its flaws. Residents submitted 134 questions about the proposal to the committee, and one of Barnet's best-known bloggers, Mrs Angry, and I were each allowed a magnificent 3 minutes to make our public comment.

Only 100 of the demonstrators could fit in the expanded public gallery, and the remainder – including a small brass band – stood outside below an open window. The demonstrators chanted 'Save our libraries' and the band played hymns and carols. We were pleased by the support; the Tory councillors were not.

So where are we now?

Sadly, the new proposal retains many of the rejected ideas and has not addressed any of the omissions for which the first one was heavily criticized.

The big difference is that none of the libraries will be closed *immediately*, allowing the Tory councillors to crow 'we're not closing any libraries', a mantra they hope will see them through the next local elections.

The truth is that some of libraries are designed to be closed. All but one will be reduced in size by between 50 and 89 per cent: 3 to 5,382 sq ft, 6 to 2,153, and 4 to 1990 sq ft, figures so precise that you know they've been worked out by a formula and bear no relation to reality.

Ten of the 14 libraries will have professional staff hours cut by 70 per cent and 4 by 100 per cent. Those four, euphemistically called Partnership libraries, will be run by volunteers, and open for 15 hours a week.

We all know that without a librarian, a library run only by volunteers – wonderful as they may be – is just a community centre with books. Partnership libraries will be the first to fail and then be closed.

Massive space reductions mean reductions in stock too, but the council says that's OK because we'll have a bigger digital library. That is no use to the great many people who do not have their own computer or access to broadband.

It can never compensate for the loss in space to accommodate library users of all ages. So the council will look at the figures, claim falling usage and mark these libraries for closure. It could take a year or two.

No, says the council, the libraries will be open for longer hours, so more people can use them. Those longer hours will be completely unstaffed: not even a caretaker. No security except for unmonitored CCTV.

Too bad if there is an emergency; handle it yourself. Register and get a PIN and the library is yours – we fear some people might take that too literally and remove stock and, particularly, IT equipment.

Separate rooms, including toilets, will be off limits. Some people won't go because they want the help professional staff can give them, others because they wouldn't feel safe or will find it too difficult to gain entry. No one under 16 will be allowed in unless accompanied by an adult. Sorry, you can't come here to do your homework and study for your exams.

The consultation on this revised proposal starts next week and will run for only 10 weeks. A Save Barnet Libraries committee is meeting to plan our next moves.

We will continue to fight for a proper library service in Barnet in every way we can, and hope that our campaign contributes to the national campaign.

Barbara Jacobson