The Friends of Reading and Education's Formal Response to Planned Cuts to Library Services in the Borough of Haringey

In this response to the proposals for revisions of the library service set out in paragraphs S19-21 (at pp.7-8) of the Budget Consultation 2024/25 document, *Our Haringey, Our Future*, the Friends of Reading and Education (FORE), the umbrella group representing all the Friends library groups in the borough, set out below why we consider the Council's planned cuts of 31% over a three-year period in two stages to be shortsighted and likely to cause irreparable damage to the library services in Haringey. FORE considers that a properly functioning library service cannot be provided without reasonable opening hours for those at work and home of all ages and incomes, or without well-trained professional librarians. Cutting opening hours and replacing our library professionals with volunteers and security guards would effectively make access to the service unviable for many residents.

In the past, the social value of library services has proved difficult to assess because the service covers so many areas. However, in this response to the consultation process FORE have made use of the Economic Valuation of Library Services (EVOLS) tool developed by economists from the University of East Anglia (UEA). The tool was created to show decision makers that the libraries are worth the money spent on them as it ascribes financial values to library services based on their commercial rates, the savings created by taxpayers and monetary impact on library services. We are able to make use of the EVOLS tool because the economists at UEA extrapolated the findings to all of England's 3000+ libraries.

The economists at UEA discovered that library services covered eleven main areas. These are all areas covered by the library service in our borough.

- Book and other media borrowing
- Browsing and information
- Digital services
- In-library events
- Community hubs
- Health benefits (physical and mental health)
- Loneliness

- Combatting loneliness
- Computing and digital literacy
- Sanctury and shelter
- Specialised assistance and support

Because of the short time made available for the consultation process, it will not be possible for us to highlight the social values of all the services covered by the eleven areas. Our focus will be on the areas of Digital Services, Health and Wellbeing and Reading and Literacy. However, it is important to realise that the way residents make use of the areas overlap. For example, people attending sessions such as the Knitting and Crochet Workshop at Coombes Croft Library or Crochet Club at St Ann's may be attending not only to develop a particular craft skill, but also to combat loneliness or because of the health benefits of being able to socialise with people sharing their interests. Another example of this overlapping is the fact that for many young people at the end of the school day, the libraries are there to provide reading materials and a place to study. But they can also be used as a place of sanctuary and shelter if they wish to avoid getting involved in any gangs in their area.

Digital Services

The digital divide is increasing in the UK. A report by the House of Lords' Communications and Digital Committee (CDC), entitled *Digital Exclusion* (June 2023), revealed that in the UK, 7 million households have no broadband or mobile internet access. The Citizens Advice Service also produced the report *Access Denied: Digital Disadvantage and Exclusion in the Energy Market* (November 2022) which revealed that 1m people have cut back or have cancelled their internet packages in the last year due to affordability issues.

This is why the digital training and access to the internet provided for residents unable to afford it at home, which is provided by Coombes Croft, along with other libraries in the borough, is so important. If residents are Job Seekers, they can use the computers to apply for jobs which the DSS requires them to do on a regular basis. The EVOLS tool has worked out that the benefit for each resident of digital inclusion is £379 per participant.

FORE considers that plans for digital-only access to library services, threaten to exacerbate things for people who are not digitally savvy,

deepening the digital divide and excluding sections of the local population who have been loyal users of the library over many years.

Health and Well Being Social Value of the Library Service

The Joseph Rowntree Trust report, *Anxiety Nation: Britain Epidemic of Mental Health Problems and Rampant Economic Insecurity* (November 2022) has disclosed rocketing rates of diagnosis for anxiety and depression in the UK and has established that there exist numerous connections between financial insecurity and poor mental health. Over the past ten years, many services for people suffering from a mental illness have been cut. The library service provides a positive intervention to support residents in the area of health and wellbeing. They provide for example, low intensity, less impactful services such as the knitting groups previously mentioned, as well as the Shared Reading groups which bring people together through stories and poems. These are the type of activities which residents can use to socialise, support their mental health and relieve feelings of isolation. They also are locations for activities such as the Connected Communities programme which is designed to improve access to council and voluntary support in Haringey and help people better understand the root causes of health issues.

The EVOLS tool estimates that library interventions in this area varies from between £244 for low intensity, less impactful services, (such as the Shared Reading Groups for example), and £60,000 for more impactful high intensity interventions.

Reading and Literacy

A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2002), showed that reading for pleasure is the single highest factor for how well a child does in life. Their report makes it clear that access to reading materials for children is a matter of social justice. Yet the results from the latest annual literacy survey by the National Literacy Trust show that children's reading enjoyment is at its lowest level in almost two decades. A library such as Stroud Green and Harringay with its daily offering of activities for under-fives, plays an

important role in introducing children, often coming from across the borough, to reading and related activities. This provision makes up for cuts and closures in other council services.

The EVOLS tool has given a value calculation of a value of up to £60,000 throughout the lifetime of a child and a value of £279 per participant in any programme.

Financial Measurement of the Social Value of the Library Service in Haringey

The economists at UEA using the EVOLS tool worked out that a branch library typically provides between £600,000 - £1.5m of value. A library such as Stroud Green would be at the lower end at £600,000 and main branch libraries such as Wood Green and Marcus Garvey would be between £1 million - £1.5 m per annum. They discovered when they extrapolated the social value findings to all of England's 3000+ libraries, the national total to be £3.4 billion, which represents a return on investment of at least six times the cost.

In Haringey, the library budget is £4,240,967. Therefore, using the EVOLS tool, the return on the investment made by the borough is at least £25,445,802.

Final Thoughts

The council's planned reduction in library hours as outlined in its budget consultation document will mean that there will be less access to the services provided by the libraries in the eleven areas for residents, which will inevitably result in a hollowing out of the service. The councils plan in the longer term, to no longer have library staff and not have toilet facilities at libraries without staff will simply mean that many of the services will become unviable for mothers and fathers with young children, people with disabilities, older people and those needing to use the study facilities for long periods. In many areas of the borough, there are no available toilet facilities outside of those provided in the libraries, which are often the only public buildings in their areas free for residents to enter.

FORE considers that many of the council's plans to make savings will have unintended consequences. For example, their intention to no longer

have paper copies of newspapers in the libraries would discriminate against elderly people who use the service to read about world events and socialise with regular users to combat loneliness, and for whom the walk to the library is their only exercise. In discussions with young mothers and fathers at one storytelling session, concern was expressed that changing the library hours could mean that the libraries would not open in the morning, and they argued that this was often the best time for parents with very young children to attend.

A hollowing out of the library service will inevitably occur if the council make the decision to act on plans to use volunteers, or voluntary organisations with no track record of engagement in reading and literacy activities, rather than professional librarians, and further on down the line, not have any staff in the libraries at all as they would be monitored by CCTV. We believe that the professional librarians are the fulcrum of the entire service; crucial not only for nurturing the reading of young users; but also, for the effective co-ordination and development of the eleven service areas already described. FORE believes that a public community library without public-facing librarians cannot be described as being a proper library.

From the above, it should be apparent that libraries are more than their book stock, whether it exists online or as hard copies. Over the past ten years, it is clear that libraries in the borough have had to increase the services they provide because of cuts in other public services and the economic hardship being experienced by many residents. They have had to respond flexibly to environmental as well as economic challenges. For example, because of the climate crisis, Haringey Council designated certain libraries with air conditioning “cool” spaces for residents wishing to avoid excessively high temperatures in the summer of 2022. In addition, because of the steep rise in fuel bills, libraries are now, an integral part of the Haringey Warm Network.

Furthermore, what is not often recognised is the importance of libraries to the maintenance of civil society in the borough. They contribute to partnerships with other services, organisation and community groups, and provide space and resources for voluntary and community-led activities which may not otherwise be resourced.

Haringey deserves praise for the fact that it has nine libraries, free to access and providing a wide range of services and opportunities to initiate and develop activities. We recognise this and are proud of our

borough. Given this reputation and the obvious rewards which libraries bring to the lives of local people of all ages and from all communities across the borough, it is therefore hard to imagine how Haringey can hope to compete successfully as a 'London Borough of Culture' in 2017, if the current cuts in provision are not halted.

Our libraries are very often the jewel in the crown of the areas they are located within. A report by Suffolk Council produced in spring 2023 found that for libraries, by far, the biggest cash payback comes from the mere existence of libraries as a place to be, and a place for other groups and organisations to do their thing. Any calculable added cost is minimal – the libraries are there anyway.

From the above, it should be evident that for a borough concerned to save money, that any diminution of the library budget will inevitably store up social problems for the future: problems which will require even more expensive solutions. FORE are therefore requesting the decision makers to take this opportunity to look to the long-term economic health and viability of the library service in the borough, rather than make cuts in the short-term which will prove to be ill-thought out and a false economy.