

Cabinet	 TOWER HAMLETS
28 October 2020	
Report of: Neville Murton, Corporate Director, Resources	Classification: Unrestricted
Revised approach to Ideas Stores & Library Service	

Lead Member	Councillor Sabina Akhtar, Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit
Originating Officer(s)	Teresa Heaney, Interim Divisional Director Customer Programme
Wards affected	All wards
Key Decision?	No
Forward Plan Notice Published	13th October 2020
Reason for Key Decision	This report is not considered a key decision as the key decision will come later in the process.
Strategic Plan Priority / Outcome	Priority Three: Outcome 9 – People say we are open and transparent putting residents at the heart of everything we do Outcome 11 – People say we continuously seek innovation and strive for excellence to embed a culture of sustainable improvement

Executive Summary

This report sets out a proposal for the future of our Idea Store Service. Idea Stores bring together library services with adult learning, digital hubs and a valued ‘third space’ offer where residents can meet in informal ways. Idea Stores are valued by our residents and their local communities.

During the spring, all our sites had to close for an extended period due to the pandemic. The impact of social distancing on service design and the need to support the wider response to Covid mean that currently only our four key sites are able to re-open and with a limited offer. Three of our sites are likely to remain closed for several more months. In the case of IS Watney Market and Bethnal Green Library this is to provide vital space to NHS services Covid response at the local level. Re-opening Cubitt Town Library, our smallest and least used site, in a Covid secure way has not been a priority due to space and other practical concerns.

Over the last 18 months we have seen significantly increased uptake of our digital offer. Books are issued and returned using self-service machines, and registration

and administration of adult learning courses is now mainly online. We have also continued to publicise the wealth e-resources available to Idea Store members (e-books and audio books) and the uptake of this pan-London offer by TH residents is impressive. This change has been accelerated by Covid and we now have a hybrid offer for adult learning, and a lot more resources online for those who want to engage with activities, but are unable or unwilling to engage face to face.

Face to face support is however valued by residents and will continue to be needed, particularly by those unable to access services on-line due to economic, physical, learning or language barriers. The Idea Stores (IS) remain central to our plans to enable residents to have supported access to our services and to address digital exclusion.

It is likely that Covid-19 will continue to prevent a return to normal service for an extended period to come. In light of this and the increased financial challenge the council is facing we propose to make a number of changes to the way the service is delivered. We believe these changes will help make the service sustainable for the long term and build on the innovations that have been introduced.

We are therefore proposing changes that, at the highest level would see:

- Development/Refurbishment of our four key sites as flexible and secure spaces
- Continued development of our digital services
- The closure of our smallest site (Cubitt Town Library)
- That when Bethnal Green Library and IS Watney Market are released from their Covid response use that they will re-open with a reduced service
- A reduction in evening staffing levels
- A reduction in Sunday opening at our four key sites; 4 hours instead of 6.

These broad proposals will form the core of our consultation with the public. We will seek views on the proposal and its impact, how it might be implemented, and offer an alternative option.

Recommendations:

The Mayor in Cabinet is recommended to:

- Note the proposed programme of consultation and engagement on the Idea Store service, to commence in late November 2020,
- Agree the proposed future model for the Idea Store service, subject to refinement pending the outcome of the consultation. A future key decision on this issue will be returned to Cabinet in early 2021.

1 REASONS FOR THE DECISIONS

- 1.1 The shift in resident behaviour (pre-covid) towards using self-service machines and other digital options mean our overall staffing requirement has reduced.
- 1.2 Furthermore, the pandemic has changed the Idea Stores service and the way it is delivered; accelerating the change in the way that residents choose to interact with us.
- 1.3 We are facing significant financial pressures which have only worsened due to Covid.
- 1.4 We need not only to deliver savings that are already planned, but to offer options that would support the council to meet the additional financial challenge

2 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 2.1 Keep services unchanged. This is not recommended and would result in a budget shortfall for the service in 21/22 and an increased pressure on other services to identify additional savings.
- 2.2 Deliver a similar level of saving by permanently ceasing Idea Store services at Cubitt Town Library, Bethnal Green Library and IS Watney Market. This option is not recommended as we believe the impact on service users and local communities would be unacceptable.
- 2.3 Develop an alternative option. This report gives a rationale for the proposed solution and an alternative (above). However, it is important to note that the proposal will be subject to a public consultation and that the final proposal that comes back will take the findings from this into account

3 DETAILS OF THE REPORT

Existing Service

- 3.1 Idea Store (IS) is Tower Hamlets Council's unique offer of integrated library, adult learning and information services. Created in 2002 in response to the lowest participation and satisfaction levels in libraries in London, Idea Store quickly became an icon for innovative services that are loved by the Tower Hamlet's community and admired nationally and internationally. There are five Idea Stores, strategically located in the highest footfall areas in the borough. As well as a very strong, modern library offer, customers can also enjoy 800+ courses for adults and families, book groups, art exhibitions, cultural celebrations, under 5s and 50+ sessions, access to the Council's online services and much more. The Idea

Store concept is now widely recognised as best practice in social cohesion in a diverse community.

- 3.2 Idea Stores have gone against the national trend of chronic decline, and library visits in Tower Hamlets have quadrupled. Last year we saw nearly 2,000,000 visits, the fourth highest in London. Participation in adult learning has doubled (8,000 yearly enrolments) and access to online services has also seen a substantial increase. Satisfaction levels are now on a par with the best library services in the UK, and the Idea Store innovation ethos is being maintained during the pandemic, with a number of activities and initiatives that ensure local residents continue to receive excellent library, learning and information services.
- 3.3 We continue to innovate and significant change has been delivered over the last 2 years; adoption of the self-service machines and the implementation of online course registration have, in particular, reduced the number of full time equivalent posts needed to run the service safely.
- 3.4 Given the size of Tower Hamlets, our service compares relatively well to other boroughs across the board and particularly in terms of the number of public access PC's available and resident's uptake of downloadable e-resources such as e-books and magazines and audio books.

Impact of Covid

- 3.5 During the unavoidable closure of sites the IS Service successfully shifted some of its delivery. The service has seen over 2000 new members join since the end of March and a significant increase in online activity. Whilst many groups are still unable to meet physically, we have been delivering storytime, conversation groups and bookclubs via other means since early summer. Tower-Hamlets is part of a consortium that purchase access to downloadable e-resources. The table below shows the number of downloads in comparison to other London boroughs(April – Sept 2020).

London Borough	eBooks	Audiobooks	All digital loans
Tower Hamlets	32,658	16,141	48,799
Merton	26,644	10,184	36,828
Redbridge	24,609	11,116	35,725
Brent	23,442	10,050	33,492
Sutton	20,509	11,185	31,694
Hackney	16,331	13,638	29,969
Enfield	17,963	10,452	28,415
Havering	16,385	11,064	27,449
Kingston			24,642

	10,764	13,878	
Ealing	16,663	7,516	24,179
Waltham Forest	14,332	9,231	23,563
Newham	15,040	6,729	21,769
Harrow	14,505	6,678	21,183
Croydon	7,482	12,828	20,310
Luton	14,104	4,549	18,653
Barking & Dagenham	8,313	4,263	12,576
Lewisham	6,368	4,127	10,495
Hounslow	1,115	6,388	7,503
Total	287,227	170,017	457,244

Tower Hamlets residents have previously made good use of this resource but this last 6 months has seen a c70% increase on the same period last year. It is also equates to slightly more physical loans than IS Watney Market (or the two libraries combined) made in the same period this year.

- 3.6 Three IS sites (Whitechapel, Crisp Street and Bow) are now open with IS Canary Wharf due to open soon, but services are limited to borrowing and returning books, and access to a limited number of bookable PCs. Adult Learning which was delivered as much online as possible during closures has started a new term with a new hybrid offer. Physical class sizes are smaller but numbers choosing to register and attend are good and the response to online courses, and hybrid learning has been encouraging.
- 3.7 Numbers allowed in the buildings are necessarily low for public health reasons, however capacity is currently sufficient to support resident demand and we continue to deliver library group activities online.
- 3.8 The pandemic is going to continue to impact how we interact with our residents, not just for the next 6 months, but into the future. We need sites and a service offer that can continue to flex around social distancing measures as well as supporting the shift in behaviour that has happened with more people doing more online than ever before.

Budget Pressures

- 3.9 Since 2011-12 in the face of unprecedented reductions in Government funding and increasing demand on services, the need to make savings has dominated the Council's financial planning process. We have had to save £190m since 2010 due to government austerity and increasing demand. Prior to COVID-19, we had expected to have needed to save a further £39m over the next three years. That position has deteriorated further due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.10 There are two previously agreed savings in the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) which relate to the Idea Store Service and total £1M. Approximately £600K of this can be delivered by realising the staffing efficiency made possible by the adoption of self-service machines, online registration and other innovations.
- 3.11 In order to deliver the remaining £400K and to support the council to meet its increased financial pressure we have developed a proposal that delivers c £1M (£400K against existing MTFS and £600K new saving)

A Possible Five-year Vision

- 3.12 Alongside the need to make savings we wish to continue to invest in our Idea Stores, and are proposing a 5-year vision which would result in:
- Four well-placed Idea Stores situated at Chrissp Street, Bow, a new site on the Isle of Dogs and with a flag-ship store in Whitechapel. The Whitechapel store will be split across the current IS Whitechapel and New Town Hall and acting as a cultural campus for the borough.
 - All four sites will have seen some redevelopment including space designs which will support people to stay socially distant if required (current issues with Bow will be redesigned out).
 - Bethnal Green Library and IS Watney Market will be run as satellite sites for IS Bow and IS Whitechapel respectively with a small service offer designed around historic usage patterns and the needs of the community.
 - The digital offer which grew exponentially under Covid 19 will have continued to develop.

Savings Options

- 3.13 In order to reshape the service to deliver safely in a post Covid environment and to deliver both the existing shortfall and an additional £600k saving we propose to do the following
- Not to re-open Cubitt Town Library in the short term and then, pending results of the consultation, to close it permanently from the 31st March 2021
 - Bethnal Green Library is currently dedicated to supporting the national covid response (6 to 12 Months). Post Covid, we propose to re-open the service in this building but at a reduced level of 15 hours per week.
 - IS Watney Market is currently being used as a Covid testing Center (6 to 12 months). Post Covid, we propose to re-open this site but with a reduced footprint (one floor) and fewer hours (30 per week).
 - To reduce staffing levels during the evening. Tutors and security staff will also be on site but there will be fewer dedicated IS staff member available at each site.
 - To reduce Sunday opening hours at ISW, ISCS, ISB and ISCW to four hours per site from six. The actual hours at each site will continue to compliment the opening hours of the facilities around them.
 - To continue to develop our online offer and resources.
 - To develop our four main sites to increase their flexibility and ability to support social cohesion in a post covid environment.
- 3.14 The above proposal is our recommended proposal however savings could equally be delivered by
- Retaining existing opening hours at ISW ISB ISCS and ISCS
 - Not re-opening the service at CTL, BGL and ISWM and ceasing it permanently from the 31st March 2021 pending the results of the public consultation

Background to proposed changes

- 3.15 **Cubitt Town Library** We propose not to reopen this site in the short term and then, pending results of the consultation to close it permanently from the 31st March 2021. Footfall at Cubitt Town Library is significantly lower than any of our other sites (just 44651 last year which is less than half of those at BGL) as is usage of the public PC's. IS Canary Wharf, whilst not popular with all local residents is close by and, longer term, we hope to replace ISCW with a new more centrally located Idea Store as part of the planned Crossharbour development. As part of our asset strategy we will look to use the building to benefit the community and generate income / offset costs.
- 3.16 **Bethnal Green Library** This site is currently dedicated to supporting the national covid response (6 to 12 Months). Post Covid, we propose to re-open the service in this building but at a reduced level of 15 hours per week. Whilst numbers are still relatively low at this site, it is a much-loved presence in the community and attendance at certain times of the day and for activities is clearly valued. We propose to open the service for 3 hours per day 5 days a

week based on historic use and resident feedback. The Library service will continue to be part of the offer from this historic building (approx 30% of building). Our asset strategy includes the release of the rest of the building to generate income (eg through letting and bookable space) but this would not affect the library space.

- 3.17 **IS Watney Market** This site is currently being used as a Covid testing Centre (6 to 12 months). Post Covid, we propose to re-open this site but with a reduced footprint (one floor) and fewer hours (30 per week). IS Watney Market does not deliver adult learning but the percentage of its members who are children is higher than any other site. We propose to develop the site as a satellite to IS Whitechapel with a strong focus on the children's offer at the site which is so popular. The 30 hours opening is based on 5 mornings a week, 2 afternoons and all day on Saturday but this will be validated and refined based on historic use and resident feedback. Our asset strategy will seek to identify a compatible shared user/activity to generate income and to mitigate costs of holding a building with a reduced IS use.
- 3.18 **Evening Staffing Levels.** After 7pm the atmosphere of the Idea Stores changes and the hustle and bustle of the day gives way to a quieter period. Few visitors at this time, need support from staff. As tutors and security staff are also on site at this time we believe it is safe to reduce dedicated IS staff In the evenings.
- 3.19 **Sunday Opening.** Currently the four main sites are open 6 hours on Sundays although their opening and closing times differ so that they compliment the typical opening times of the shopping areas in which they are situated. The stores are quieter on Sundays, but we recognise that they offer a valued space to a significant number of residents.

Public consultation

- 3.20 Given the nature of this proposal and the importance of these services a public consultation will need to be undertaken. This consultation will commence in Late November 2020 and a report on its findings, making firmer proposals will be brought back to cabinet in the first quarter of 2021.
- 3.21 While the exact details of the consultation need to be finalised, it is proposed that the consultation should seek views on the following:
- Whether residents prefer our proposed solution over the option to cease services entirely from three sites and keep the current opening hours at our four main sites.
 - Which services offered by the Idea Store residents/stakeholders most use and value;
 - In respect to Cubitt Town Library

- What impact closure of the site would have on them
 - Whether they support the long-term replacement of IS Canary Wharf with a new more centrally located IS on the Isle of Dogs
 - Potential uses of the building (nursery provision, lettable space etc)
- In respect of Bethnal Green Library & IS Watney Market
 - The days, times and activities they most value at the site(s) and think we should open
 - Any impact a reduction in opening hours would have on them
- Their views on the changes to opening hours at our four main sites and whether they think there are other times or days where changes should be considered instead.
- What use residents/stakeholders have been able to make of IS services during the pandemic.

3.22 It is proposed that the public consultation run from 23 November 2020 until 29 January 2021 – more than eight weeks to allow for the Christmas/New Year holidays.

3.23 The public consultation will comprise:

- On-line survey, supported by social media, website promotion, with possible poster sites
- Hard copies of survey – available from all idea stores with secure box for returning surveys
- Public engagement event in each area (Watney, Isle of Dogs, Bethnal Green) together with virtual events
- Contacting partners & special interest groups – including attend local meetings to seek feedback
- Members Seminar – opportunity for members to feedback
- Virtual engagement meetings (eg via Zoom or MS Teams)

4 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

4.1 We have undertaken an initial EqIA screening and have concluded that the following protected groups are likely to be disproportionately affected by the draft proposal:

- Age – older people and children as they may have to travel further to their to the nearest Idea Store to access services. Children would be less likely to travel further unsupervised.
- Disability – people with disabilities may need to travel further and may not have the support needed to do so
- Sex – majority of the people who access our parent and baby/children groups are women and they may have to travel further to gain access to their nearest provision

4.2 We are working on a high-level EqIA on the different options which are being supported by existing data on our service users and population profiles on the wards affected.

- 4.3 The EqIA will be updated using the feedback from the consultation and the outcomes of ongoing discussions with the community groups about what the final service provision could look like.
- 4.4 As part of the reorganisation change process will also assess the equalities impact on our staff affected by the final service provision.

5 OTHER STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This section of the report is used to highlight further specific statutory implications that are either not covered in the main body of the report or are required to be highlighted to ensure decision makers give them proper consideration. Examples of other implications may be:
 - Best Value Implications,
 - Consultations,
 - Environmental (including air quality),
 - Risk Management,
 - Crime Reduction,
 - Safeguarding.
 - Data Protection / Privacy Impact Assessment.
- 5.2 Under Section 7 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, 'it shall be the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof' and that the authority 'shall in particular have regard to the desirability -
 - a) of securing, by the keeping of adequate stocks, by arrangements with other library authorities, and by any other appropriate means, that facilities are available for the borrowing of, or reference to, books and other printed matter, and pictures, gramophone records, films and other materials, sufficient in number, range and quality to meet the general requirements and any special requirements both of adults and children; and
 - b) of encouraging both adults and children to make full use of the library service, and of providing advice as to its use and of making available such bibliographical and other information as may be required by persons using it; and
 - c) of securing, in relation to any matter concerning the functions both of the library authority as such and any other authority whose functions are exercisable within the library area, that there is full co-operation between the persons engaged in carrying out those functions.

6 COMMENTS OF THE CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER

- 6.1 This report recommends changes that would achieve existing savings targets totalling £1m agreed in the medium term financial strategy (please refer to the table below) and a further £0.6m Local Presence and Idea Store Asset Strategy saving proposed for 2021-22.

MTFS Savings Tracker 2020-23				20/21	21/22
Reference	Approved	Title	Original Scope of previous savings pro-formas	Savings target £'000	Savings target £'000
SAV/ RES 10 / 18-19	2018-19	Additional Local Presence Efficiencies	Further local presence and customer access improvements - (1) continue to develop/drive/encourage take up of digital services to further reduce demand for phone and face-to-face contact, thus enabling further staffing reductions (2) investigate options for including Clean & Green call handling within new refuse & recycling contract (3) consider moving to digital-only access for appropriate service areas	300	-
SAV / ALL 001 / 19-20	2019-20	Phase 2 Local Presence - putting Digital First	The increased use of digital services will be targeted to reduce staffing and transaction costs further whilst making services easier to access for residents. Digital services across the council will be designed to achieve specific cost reductions and these will be allocated on a service by service basis as the baseline costs are confirmed. This second phase of the Local Presence Review will ensure we don't duplicate services, we make the most efficient use of resources and that the way we deliver services keeps pace with what our residents want. This Review will consider options to rationalise staff, buildings and services in each of the localities.	-	700

7 COMMENTS OF LEGAL SERVICES

- 7.1 Section 7 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.
- 7.2 When making a decision, a local authority is under a duty to act fairly and in cases such as the proposed changes to provision of a public library service, this will include a duty to consult those affected by the proposals (R v Devon County Council ex parte Baker, 1992 EWCA Civ 16).
- 7.3 In taking any decision on the future of the public library service, the local authority will need to have due regard to the public sector equalities duty set out at Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. This duty requires the local authority to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010, and to advance equality of opportunity between individuals who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not. The proposals set out in this report comply with the above legislation and case law.

- 7.4 There may be an impact on staffing levels if sites are closed or overall hours are reduced. The Council is required to consult individual employees, unions and employee representatives at a formative stage. The Council will need to ensure that it has followed a fair procedure as set out in the Council's Handling Organisational Change procedure and in line with prescribed time frames to inform and consult set out in the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992.
 - 7.5 The impact on staffing is not detailed in the report as currently no decision has been taken as to which option will be pursued. A further report setting out any staffing implications will be required once the public consultation has concluded.
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Linked Reports, Appendices and Background Documents

Linked Report

- None

Appendices

- Appendix 1 - Service Information & Data

Background Documents – Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012

- None

Officer contact details for documents:

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