

Finance and Resources Scrutiny Challenge Session

Examining the Council's Revised Approach for Idea Stores and Library Services

01/03/2021



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Chair's Foreword

Public libraries like the Idea Stores and library services that we have in Tower Hamlets are vital to the wellbeing of individuals and communities. They are trusted spaces, free to enter and open to all. People are able to explore and share reading, information and ideas, knowledge and culture. They support, connect and stimulate people in many ways. They are well valued by residents, often polling in the top tier of resident satisfaction within the council's Annual Resident Survey and are an integral part of the local public services infrastructure.

The 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act required all English and Welsh Councils to have a statutory duty to provide 'comprehensive and efficient' library services. When drawing up and delivering Library strategies and plans¹, councils are expected to consider their legal obligations under Equality Act 2010, Best Value Duty 2011 guidance, Localism Act 2011 and Human Rights Act 1998.

Like many councils across the country, Tower Hamlets is no exception and is facing challenges on many fronts including the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and continued austerity measures. These challenges have led the council needing to make savings across many of its services.

As the Scrutiny Lead for Finance and Resources portfolio, I am pleased to present this report that examines the council's revised approach to Idea Stores and library services. The report enables scrutiny to contribute the consultation process and bring about positive change. The report makes a number of recommendations for the council to consider and put into action.

The Challenge Session heard from the Customer Service team (who are responsible for the Idea Stores and library services), Members of the Youth Council and the Voluntary Sector's Children and Young People's Forum Coordinator on the initial findings of the consultation, approach for the five-year vision and the likely impact of the council's proposal for savings.

I'd like to thank following people who contributed to this challenge session:

- Alex Nelson from Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets who provided an account of the voluntary sector in particular the children and young people perspective.
- Youth Council Members Saarah Rahman and Ahmed Duale (service user input)
- Councillor Sabina Akhtar, Cabinet Member for Environment, and team of council officers who provided an overview of the council's revised approach to Idea Stores and library services and responded to scrutiny questions
- My scrutiny colleagues who supported the discussion and helped to form some of the recommendations being put forward.

Councillor Leema Qureshi

Scrutiny Lead for Finance and Resources



¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-libraries-as-a-statutory-service/libraries-as-a-statutory-service>

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendations on Five-Year Vision

1	The council to provide more comprehensive information on its five-year vision for the future of Idea Stores and library services. This needs to include a full review of staffing levels to maintain services and publish further detailed information on the future site use of Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green Library. It needs to examine how library services can be supplemented by other council services and further consult residents on how proposed reduction of hours will be tailored to meet local demand.
2	The council to revisit its proposed plan for the Isle of Dogs library service and consider the merits of deprioritising Canary Wharf (as this is subject to future closure) to free up resources to sustain Cubitt Town Library Service in the interim until such time a new alternative site is opened.

Recommendations on Impact

3	The council to review and bring up to date its Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) for all Idea Stores and library services to help comprehend the impact on protected characteristic groups.
4	To further undertake comprehensive risk assessments to help understand the impact of change on wider determinants including; delayed recovery and continuation of the pandemic, impact on footfall and local economy, increase in demand user groups, impact on children and young people's educational outcomes, level of social deprivation, poverty, social isolation, crime and antisocial behaviour and community tension/ cohesion.
5	The council to review the use of Idea Stores and library service's spaces so that youth hubs can offer dedicated spaces for children and young people to use for their education and social connection needs.

Recommendations on Finance & Resource

6	The council to investigate and publish the results into the research it's undertaken for alternative / external funding streams. This must include a review of its application of fund streams such as Public Health or New Homes Bonus (earmarked for reserves), that could be aligned to a longer consultation period for examining the future delivery model of Idea Stores and library services whilst undertaking further assessments on the geography of sites being considered along with the economic impact on people.
7	The council to investigate and publish results of how it can develop revenue streams from commercialisation of the Idea Stores and library service's physical premises and its digitalisation agenda to offset some of the savings requirements

	and future proof the sustainability of Idea Stores and library services.
8	The council to market and publicise the commercialisation of the Idea Stores and library services (using its communication channels and advertising space) and to include engagement with different media groups including Bangladeshi Language Media, Social Media Influencers and others to help it achieve a wider reach for business opportunities and revenue growth.

Introduction

1.1 The Idea Stores and library services has been around for almost two decades. It is a well-established educational community provision funded by the council and offers a range of facilities including library services and adult education courses. Pre COVID-19, the service is highly valued² with over 2,000,00 physical visits and 2,000,000 hits for online services and resident satisfaction is on par with the best libraries in the country. Libraries should be seen as genuinely integral to the delivery of your council's broader corporate strategies.

1.2 The first Idea Stores was opened in Bow in 2002, followed by four further branches between 2004-2013 including Chrisp Street, Whitechapel, Canary Wharf, Watney Market. Tower Hamlets also had two traditional library services, namely Bethnal Green and Cubitt Town.

1.3 The Idea Stores and library services also features within the council's Strategic Plan 2020-23³ and contributes to the Mayoral priorities:

Priority 1: People are aspirational, independent and have equal access to opportunities.

Outcome 1: People can access a range of education, training and employment opportunities

Priority 3: A dynamic outcome-based council using digital innovation and partnership working to respond to the changing needs of our borough.

Outcome 9. People say we are open and transparent putting residents at the heart of everything we do.

1.4 The 2014 Independent Library Report for England⁴ further denotes that libraries contribute to seven outcomes that are critical to individuals and communities, including; cultural and creative enrichment, increased reading and literacy, improved digital access and literacy, helping everyone to achieve their full potential, healthier and happier lives, greater prosperity, and stronger, more resilient communities.

1.5 Whilst the 2010 government's austerity measures are still felt, COVID-19 has exacerbated the financial pressures faced by the local authority. The Idea Stores and library service has been asked to make savings £600k (plus £400k carried forward 2019-20) through its revised approach for Idea Stores and library service.

1.6 The council held a three months public consultation and it proposed two options for a revised approach to Idea Stores and library services alongside an outline of its five-year vision⁵.

Option 1: Close down Cubitt Town Library and significantly reduce hours for Watney Market Idea Store / Bethnal Green Library and reduce some hours (evenings and Sundays) at the remaining Idea Stores.

Option 2: Close down Cubitt Town Library, Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green Library and keep the remaining Idea Stores as they are.

² https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/2019_AR_S_Briefing_Paper.pdf

³ https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/community_and_living/community_plan/strategic_plan.aspx

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388989/Independent_Library_Report_-_18_December.pdf

⁵ <http://democracy-internal.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s174577/6.2%20Revised%20Approach%20to%20Ideas%20Stores%20Service.pdf>

Reason for Enquiry

- 2.1 The reason for this enquiry is that scrutiny is concerned about the potential negative impact on service users and the community resulting from the implementation of the Council's revised approach to Idea Stores and library service.
- 2.2 Scrutiny wanted to examine how the Council's proposal for a revised approach to Idea Stores and library services will impact the borough's inequality issues, its level of inclusiveness in providing access to children and young people with their educational needs and social mobility, support access for the unemployed, impact of increased social isolation for the elderly and the broader social deprivation, poverty and community cohesion issues.
- 2.3 The revised approach to Idea Stores and library services was set out as part of the Council's public consultation which took place from 30 November 2020 – 29 January 2021. Apart from understanding the insights captured from the public engagement, this was an opportunity for scrutiny and non-executive Councillors to engage with the live consultation and shape the proposals for the revised approach to Idea Stores and library services.

Methodology

- 3.1 The Challenge Session scope was framed to examine the council's revised approach to Idea Stores and library services and sought to understand:
 - The extent of change and impact on service user groups resulting from the proposed approach for Idea Stores and library services. Its mitigation options and the evidence from service users and residents.
 - Insights captured from the public engagement
 - The council's five-year vision on the future of Idea Stores and library services including how it will be funded and the risks.
- 3.2 The Session invited Youth Council Members to provide a service user perspective on the topic and the voluntary sector to provide an account of the impact on key user groups as a result of proposed changes to Idea Stores and library services.
- 3.3 In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this Finance and Resources Scrutiny Challenge Session adopted a virtual Microsoft Teams delivery in order to satisfy the Government's compliance requirements for social distancing.
- 3.4 The challenge session, chaired by Councillor Leema Qureshi, Scrutiny Lead for Finance and Resource, took place on Thursday 28 January 2021 from 6pm to 8pm

The session followed a structure that included:

- Chair's overview, reason for the enquiry and session outcome.
- Presentation from the service led by Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit
- Committee discussion and lines of enquiry
- Youth Council user feedback and input from the voluntary sector for children and young people
- Scrutiny Committee discussion/ recommendations
- Chair's closing comments and next steps.

3.5 Members in Attendance

Councillor Leema Qureshi	Scrutiny Lead for Finance and Resource (Session Chair)/ OSC Member
Councillor Sabina Akhtar	Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Brexit
Councillor James King	Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chair
Councillor Bex White	Scrutiny Lead and Chair for Children and Education Sub-Committee
Councillor Gabriela Salva-Macallan	Scrutiny Lead and Chair for Health and Adults Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Councillor Ehtasham Haque	Scrutiny Lead and Chair for Housing and Regeneration Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Councillor Denise Jones	OSC Member
Councillor Marc Francis	OSC Member
Halima Islam	OSC Member
Councillor Shad Chowdhury	Non-executive Councillor

Evidence received from officers, users, and experts:

Teresa Heaney	Interim Divisional Director Customer Services, LBTH
Sergio Dogliani	Head of Local Presence, LBTH
Alex Nelson	Voluntary Sector Children and Youth Forum Coordinator
Saarah Rahman	Youth Cabinet Member (Chair of Tower Hamlets Youth Council)
Ahmed Duale	Youth Cabinet Member (Deputy Mayor Physical Social Environment)

The Challenge Session was supported by:

Filuck Miah	Strategy and Policy Officer, Corporate
Onyekachi Ajisafe	Strategy and Policy Officer, Corporate

Key Findings and Recommendations

Recommendations on Five -Year Vision

Recommendation 1

The council to provide more comprehensive information on its five-year vision for the future of Idea Stores and library services. This needs to include a full review of staffing levels to maintain services and publish further detailed information on the future site use of Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green Library. It needs to examine how library services can be supplemented by other council services and further consult residents on how proposed reduction of hours will be tailored to meet local demand.

- 4.1 However, the Scrutiny Committee were concerned that the council's vision lacked detail or clarity. Scrutiny Committee Members believed that the vision should be framed as an integral part of the public consultation. They felt that there was no indication that there had been any in-depth consultation on the council's five-year vision itself.
- 4.1 The Scrutiny Committee received a presentation from the council's Waste and Recycling Services alongside Resource London (part of London Waste and Recycling Board).
- 4.2 The revised approach and the five-year vision raised further Scrutiny Committee questions, in particular those libraries which were in scope for significant change. Scrutiny Members are concerned about the proposal for reducing the service hours quite significantly for Watney Market Idea Store (54%) and Bethnal Green Library (70%), with Cubitt Town Library being closed down permanently. Both Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green Library are being used to provide COVID-19 assistance, but these libraries are also situated in densely populated areas of the borough.
- 4.3 The Scrutiny Committee suspect that the cutbacks in service hours for Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green Library will prepare the way for closure in the next few years. They also questioned if there are any plans to repurpose the building when it's not in use as an Idea Store. The Scrutiny Committee believe that the significant cutbacks in service hours for the Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green is irresponsible given that residents who go to school would be negatively impacted as they use this key provision to support their statutory education studies. Scrutiny Members also felt that Whitechapel Idea Store, which would be an alternative provision, would be too far for people with children residing in Wapping to travel.
- 4.4 The Scrutiny Committee's view is that the council needs to examine the cut-back in-service hours and if they are to pursue the proposed cutbacks in service hours then they should re-consult residents for the different location on how the proposed change in hours will be tailored to meet local demand. They also questioned if there are any Big Lottery Fund (provided £2Million) conditions attached to Watney Market Idea Store usage. Council officers commented that their understanding is that it is to be used for public and community services in line with the council's asset strategy for spaces.
- 4.5 The Cabinet Member acknowledged that Watney Market Idea Store is a well-used service and that the locals value its contribution to the local area, particularly the children sessions delivered from there. Whilst the change is 'drastic', the Cabinet Member's view is that the council's track record in delivering services and on reflection from the initial consultation findings will enable service hours to be adapted to accommodate peak demand, particularly access for parents and children. The council makes the point the

Watney Market Idea Store does not deliver adult learning courses, therefore reducing hours makes more sense to them. However, this posed further Scrutiny Committee questions on how the building could be better supplemented by other Council services to improve efficiencies and achieve better value for money.

- 4.6 Upon reviewing the five-year vision, the Scrutiny Committee questioned the long-term sustainability of both Watney Market Idea Store and Bethnal Green Library as satellite services to other Idea Stores. The Scrutiny Committee were also concerned about the proposed sharing of Whitechapel Idea Store's capacity with the new town hall. As this poses further speculation on whether this change would lead to future closures of these sites given that their capacity has been significantly reduced.
- 4.7 The Scrutiny Committee noted that 35 posts are at risk from this revised approach for Idea Stores and library services, which are integral to the council's savings proposal. The Scrutiny Committee felt that this level of job cuts would lead to a lower quality of service for residents. The Cabinet Member commented that the justification for a reduction in staffing levels was as a result of library services transitioning to self-service machines, online options and the proposed cuts to service hours thus making the current staffing levels excessive. Council officers also commented that the main expenditure for this service are staffing and building costs.
- 4.8 However, the Scrutiny Committee challenged the transactional approach and assumptions to making savings. The Scrutiny Committee have concerns on reducing staffing levels as it was not clear to them on the level the risks for managing capacity i.e. staffing ratio to users accessing the service. Whilst there has been (pre COVID-19) 2,000,000 online visits for services, there has also been 2,000,000 physical site visits as residents and services users access Idea stores and library services for a variety of reasons and will often need the help from staff to guide, provide advice and information and also manage the premises health and safety risks. Reducing staffing levels may also increase certain types of risks, which has been seen when frontline public services such as Transport for London station assistance staff were reduced to make savings, but the risk ratio was so high that the government were obligated to re-recruit people.
- 4.9 The Voluntary and Community Sector's Children and Young People Coordinator also commented that having regular staffing levels accrues tangible benefits as they are considered as trusted adults, positive role models and they look out for individuals when there are safeguarding needs.
- 4.10 Overall, the Scrutiny Committee felt that more needs to happen before the proposed five-year vision could be supported. Scrutiny Members felt that the proposal lacks sufficient information and clarity. They remained concerned about the scale of cutbacks to service hours on two of the services, and decisions taken for the future needs to be based on a solid strategic assessment of needs; risks identified with the proposals; a transition plan for establishing changes; how service quality will be monitored/maintained and contingency plans for intervention and improvements if services fall below expectations.

4.11 Furthermore, the council's five-year vision and its revised approach to the Idea Stores and library services did not indicate that it had fully considered any alternative options for savings:

- Commissioned libraries which could be outsourced to a third-party organisation including social impact bond providers.
- Community run libraries with council support to maintain, or even increase, local library provision while at the same time reducing costs and achieving economic and social objectives through community engagement. However, this option requires the council to have a strong commissioning framework which is in line with how the council will continue to discharge its statutory functions.

Recommendation 2

The council, to revisit its proposed plan for the Isle of Dogs library service situation, in particular to consider the merits of deprioritising Canary Wharf (as this is subject to future closure) and free up resources to sustain Cubitt Town Library Service in the interim until such time a new alternative site is opened.

5.1 The Scrutiny Committee were concerned that five years implied that a number of residents on the Isle of Dogs could not get to library or Idea store within walking distance if Cubitt Town Library is closed down. A Scrutiny Committee Member used a case example of a family with young children, who live in the Samuda Estate on the Isle of Dogs, to contest the travel time presented (via Google Maps). It required more than 26 minutes to get from their home to the Canary Wharf Idea Store.

5.2 The Scrutiny Committee were aware that the council has recently updated its borough profile information (2020) which the service may wish to consider utilising in order to help inform its EqIA. In addition, the council may also have significant information which could be used to inform the EqIA such as Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs). This was developed by Health and Wellbeing Boards to commission health-related activity, and is a rich data source in relation to demographic trends and social, economic, health and wellbeing measures

5.3 The Scrutiny Committee questioned the timing for moving Canary Wharf Idea Store as five years is a long time for a child of three to four years old as it represents a critical part of their formative educational and development years. The Independent Library Report for England⁶ adds, that there is still a clear need for safe, non-judgemental, spaces where people of ages can access knowledge for free, supported by the expertise of the library workforce. This is particularly true for the most vulnerable in society who need support and guidance and to children and young people who benefit from engagement with libraries outside of the formal classroom environment.

5.4 The Scrutiny Committee enquired if the council considered Cubitt Town Hall as the main hub whilst they wait to relocate Canary Wharf Idea Store to the Isle of Dogs with the

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388989/Independent_Library_Report-18_December.pdf

support of nearby community centres to provide additional capacity if space becomes an issue. The Scrutiny Committee also felt that moving the hub more central on Isle of Dogs may help to reduce the connection time to get to the library service and as Canary Wharf Idea Store is close to Chrisp Street Idea Store commuting between the two may be more amenable.

5.5 Whilst the Scrutiny Committee acknowledged the pressures on the council's budget and its obligations to balance the books, Scrutiny Members asked if council would give further consideration to splitting shifts at Chrisp Street Idea Store, in order to have the service hours (middle of the day) when Chrisp Street is closed. This would help free up resources to enable Cubitt Town Library access for Isle of Dogs residents who live too far away from Canary Wharf Idea Store.

5.6 The Cabinet Member conceded that Canary Wharf Idea Store might be too far to travel for some parents with young children and that some residents on the Isle of Dogs have raised their concerns that there isn't a comprehensive plan for Isle of Dogs and includes issues on Cross Harbour planning. The Cabinet Member confirmed that she would consider the split shifts as an option to provide more hours to Cubitt Town Library.

5.7 The Scrutiny Committee recognised that the Cubitt Town Library is a Carnegie library and they asked if the council applied for the funding from Carnegie UK (ended in November 2020). A Scrutiny Committee Member also cited the cost implications of closed libraries, in particular a library in Lambeth which closed and cost £2,200 per day to provide security. The Scrutiny Member felt that the challenge is that savings need to be looked at in the round, and not just based on individual portfolios. There needs to be more investigation of all options and implications to mitigate cuts on the overall savings.

5.8 The Scrutiny Committee enquired if there were any plans for the alternative use of the Cubitt Town Library building. The Cabinet Member responded that no decisions have been made as to what the site will be used for once it closed, but they imagine it will be for public good or community use.

Recommendations on Impact

Recommendation 3

The council, to review and bring up to date its Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) for all Idea stores and library services with more current information so as to help better comprehend the impact on protected characteristic groups

6.1 The Scrutiny Committee questioned the value of using 2011 Census. Whilst it may be permissible to use a snapshot view, it was at most 10 years too old. The Scrutiny Committee deemed there have been significant changes in the last decade and that the 2011 Census data used for the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) did not accurately reflect the changes to the borough. The Scrutiny Committee outlined an example of this based on population numbers. There had been an increase from 2011, set at 252,000, to 325,000 in 2021. The numbers alone suggests a significant number of the population could affect the EqIA. There was also a common understanding that London Borough of Tower Hamlets was a transient borough with a significant young population. The Scrutiny Committee recommended a review of the EqIA to reflect more up to date borough profile information as this will provide better context on who the changes will impact the most.

6.2 The Scrutiny Committee noted a repetitive assumption is made within the EqlA for young people under 18 and 60 plus age group. It suggests accessing other IDEA Stores and Library Service would not be difficult as they would have accessible transport. However, the Scrutiny Committee were acutely aware that there would be an impact on the 19-59 age group and the EqlA itself suggests that the 16-64 user group would be most affected as a result of these changes.

6.3 Under the Public Sector Equality Duty 2011⁷ which looks to address s.149 of the Equality Act, an EqlA should make reasonable attempts to provide coverage of all the nine protected characteristics⁸. The Scrutiny Committee noted that the following protected characteristics: gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, and sexual orientation, were absent within the EqlA. This also reinforces the Scrutiny Committee's previous point on the requirement to apply more recent borough profile data to accurately reflect the make-up of the community as these groups may also be subject to being disproportionately affected by the council's proposed changes.

6.4 The Scrutiny Committee also believe there are 'hidden communities' in Tower Hamlets, such as Travellers, who could also be disproportionately affected by the council's proposed changes impact and this needs to be considered.

6.5 The Scrutiny Committee also noted that whilst there had been some reference (within the EqlA) to the remaining Idea Stores: Bow, Chrisp Street, Canary Wharf and Whitechapel, it was very much light touch and lacked substance. Given that there would be applied cuts to service hours, including Sundays, which represents change, the Scrutiny Committee feel that the EqlA assumption is insufficient and needs to reflect the impact on the different user groups so that its robust. The Cabinet Member stated that an initial EqlA was completed and expects further EqlA will be undertaken to address the gaps.

Recommendation 4

To further undertake comprehensive risk assessments to help better understand the impact of change on wider determinants including delayed recovery and continuation of the pandemic, impact on footfall and local economy, increase in demand user groups, impact on children and young people's educational outcomes, level of social deprivation, poverty, social isolation, crime and antisocial behaviour and community tension/ cohesion.

7.1 The Scrutiny Committee were concerned about the resulting impact from the council's proposed savings. On the economy, the Scrutiny Committee were of the view that there is a looming double dip recession which may result in high levels of unemployment. There are concerns already with a huge number of businesses that have been forced to close because of the pandemic situation. Scrutiny Members were concerned about education and job poverty once the pandemic comes to an end and believe that the community will need support from the council. London Borough of Tower Hamlets is already well documented as having the highest poverty levels for children and pensioner age groups in the country. Furthermore, Scrutiny Members raised the issue that 20 of the

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality-duty>

⁸ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics>

neighbourhoods in the borough are classified as being in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

- 7.2 Unemployed people are a key user group for Idea Stores and library services (as indicated in the EqIA) and with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and potential negative impact from Brexit, this may increase the numbers of unemployed (as some are currently being supported by the government's interim furlough scheme). The Scrutiny Committee believe that there is a real risk of high demand for Idea Stores and library services from this group with a shortage of supply. This may worsen if social distancing measures remain in place for prolonged periods thus further reducing access to this key service at a critical time. The Scrutiny Committee questioned that if the proposals go forward, what work has been undertaken to absorb the additional footfall and how they intend to mitigate the situation with increase demand vs reduced capacity and social distancing measures in place.
- 7.3 Unemployed people are a key user group for Idea Stores and library services (as indicated in the EqIA) and with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and potential negative impact from Brexit, this may increase the numbers of unemployed (as some are currently being supported by the government's interim furlough scheme). The Scrutiny Committee believe that there is a real risk of high demand for Idea Stores and library services from this group with a shortage of supply. This may worsen if social distancing measures remain in place for prolonged periods thus further reducing access to this key service at a critical time. The Scrutiny Committee questioned that if the proposals go forward, what work has been undertaken to absorb the additional footfall and how they intend to mitigate the situation with increase demand vs reduced capacity and social distancing measures in place.
- 7.4 The Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL)⁹ argued that in times of economic hardship, it could be argued that more people will need libraries to learn new skills, seek employment, apply for jobs, write CVs etc.
- 7.5 The Scrutiny Committee commented that it's also important to think about the elderly people, particularly those who are digitally excluded. The Royal National Institute of Blind People¹⁰ argued that the presence of libraries in residential areas was of importance particularly for more vulnerable users, such as elderly and disabled people, who were often less able to travel, and more likely not to be able to afford books and IT.
- 7.6 The Scrutiny Committee examined the potential difficulties and hardship that children and young people could be facing as a result of the council's proposed changes. The Scrutiny Committee heard from two of the Youth Council Members who gave an account of their own usage of Idea Stores and library services. They commented on how much they valued the service and informed the Scrutiny Committee that they were disappointed with the proposed cutbacks to service hours. They were worried about the impact of the proposed changes on children, low income families and the unemployed. Their own experience in growing up drew out their views that many of the borough's

⁹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmcmds/587/587.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmcmds/587/587.pdf>

children and young people struggle to find a safe space like the Idea Stores and library services as they would often live in overcrowded accommodation.

7.7 They added that the cuts to service hours would impact them as much as their peers who use the Idea Stores and library services after school or college to complete their studies outside of the classroom environment and is a key support function that is pertinent for them to achieve well with their education goals. The two Youth Council Members also flagged up that their concerns that many of the children cannot afford laptops or need to share the usage with their siblings, and in many cases, this is about a lack of funds to purchase data for online access. The Scrutiny Committee also heard that Idea Stores and library services provide the right environment for young people to be social and connect with others given that youth club provision was cut right back and they feel that pandemic has further drawn out the inequalities felt by children from deprived backgrounds.

7.8 Scrutiny Members also questioned the cost of running the Idea Stores and library services in comparison and offsetting the costs to the council for managing issues such as anti-social behaviour (ASB), social isolation/ mental health, and more recently the impact of COVID-19 on missed schooling and education. The Scrutiny Committee felt that Idea Stores and library services will play a crucial role in helping the borough's recovery including delivering the council's strategic objectives, whether this is linked to community cohesion, health and wellbeing or economic sector. Libraries play an important role in boosting health literacy, a person's skills, knowledge and understanding about how to find and use information so they can act to support and improve their own health and wellbeing. They are also places where people can come to meet others, helping to reduce social isolation.

Recommendation 5

The council to review the use of Idea Stores and library services' spaces so that youth hubs can offer dedicated spaces for children and young people to use for their education and social connection needs.

8.1 The Scrutiny Committee reflected on the views provided by the Youth Council Members on having a dedicated space for them at the Idea Stores and Library Services. The Scrutiny Committee heard how one of the Youth Council Members had to travel to different branches of the Idea Stores to locate a place where they could be settled to study. They commented that the issue here was adults were occupying spaces which were supposed to be available for children and young people.

8.2 The Scrutiny Committee also heard about the challenges that young people face in terms of overcrowded homes and how having a safe dedicated space which can stimulate their thinking is critical to their education success. Scrutiny Committee Members enquired if the Council could consider dedicating some space at the Idea Stores for young people only.

8.3 The Cabinet Member confirmed that they are prepared to investigate better spacing for young people within the Idea Stores and acknowledged that this should also be the case for elderly residents.

Recommendations on Finance and Resources

Recommendation 6

The council, to investigate and publish the results into the research it's undertaken for alternative / external funding streams and to further include a review of its application of fund streams such as Public Health or New Homes Bonus (earmarked for reserves), that could be aligned to a longer consultation period for examining the future delivery model of Idea Stores and library services whilst undertaking further assessments on the geography of sites being considered along with the economic impact on people.

- 9.1 The Scrutiny Committee noted that the proposed revised approach to Idea Stores and library services will help to achieve savings of £1million (£400k against existing MTFS and £600k of new savings). The Cabinet papers from 27 January 2021 which includes appendix 4B¹¹ indicates that savings from 2018-19 and 2019-20 have not been delivered. Given that the previous in year's savings have not been met, the Scrutiny Committee believe that the Mayor in Cabinet should reflect on the need to make further savings of £600k (on top of the contribution the Idea Stores and library services are already required to make) and that perhaps the Mayor should strongly consider scaling back this saving.
- 9.2 The Scrutiny Committee commented on the extension of Greater London Leisure (GLL) contracts and believe that these should be reviewed in the round as opposed to proposing savings coming out of Idea Stores and library services, given that this is one of the council's flagship strengths. Scrutiny Members also questioned the thinking behind treating Idea Stores and library services differently to the leisure contract.
- 9.3 Scrutiny Members believe a review of the councils' application funding steams such as Public Health funding should be considered in the round for Idea Stores and library services support. The Scrutiny Committee were also concerned that this savings proposal disproportionately affected front line services and they believe that this needs to be seen in the context (not of a budget that's been put on the table) that there is £7 Million pounds of New Homes Bonus being set aside (reserves) for next year to be spent the year after. Scrutiny Members believe that this level of finance could potentially be made available and use some of this (£250k) to offset savings proposal for Idea Stores and library services. Scrutiny Committee struggle to see how cuts this deep meet their agenda to serve residents.
- 9.4 Historically, councils have been the primary funding source of public libraries. The Libraries Taskforce¹² believe that delivering critical services direct to the community through libraries can lead to better outcomes for the public and savings in other services' budget. The council might also wish to consider funding streams including:
- Philanthropy and fundraising such as schemes similar to council's Space Hive Crowd Funding.
 - Social Impact Bonds (to support initiatives in areas such as digital inclusion, literacy or business growth)

¹¹ <https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s179275/6.1.4B%20New%20Savings%20Proposals%20Proformas.pdf>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021>

- Private Sector Partnerships (Sponsorship funding) or through council's strategic Partnership Executive Group.
- Wider Grants and Blended funds where relevant e.g. New Home Building Fund.

9.5 Scrutiny Members believe that a longer consultation period would be required to examine more details cost implications beyond transactional savings and the wider economic impact this will have on residents. Scrutiny Members expressed that they would like to see a review of geography of the sites as Bethnal Green Library remains an important space for north of the borough and cutting service hours would be problematic particularly as Pritchard Road Day Centre being closed and elderly residents being signposted to use Bethnal Green Library when the service is being reduced by 70%. Scrutiny Members also felt that the timing of the current consultation was poor and should have been delayed given that the country is in the midst of a worldwide pandemic and for a significant number of residents their concerns would about the impact of COVID-19 and dealing with the loss of life and that this should be reviewed to a time when people can give the merits of the proposal real consideration.

9.6 A local Ward Councillor also raised the concern and felt that his constituents were not aware of the consultation and questioned how this was publicised. The Cabinet Member acknowledged that in normal times they would have taken a face to face approach in consulting with residents, however given the pandemic situation, the council had extensively promoted the online consultation and two focus groups to the community as an alternative option, a dedicated phone number was also provided for staff to carry out the survey over the phone. Council officers also added that prior to Idea Stores being closed by the government's lockdown measure, paper copies were made available for residents to complete and drop back. The Cabinet Member conceded that if more consultation time is required then this is something that they can look into.

Recommendation 7

The council, to investigate and publish its results on how it can develop revenue streams from commercialisation of the Idea Stores and Library services physical premises and its digitalisation agenda to offset some of the savings requirements and future proof the sustainability of Idea Stores and library services.

10.1 In general, Idea Stores and library service's duty is to provide library service that is free and universally accessible. Library services such as book loans, information provision and computer access are still a core part of what's on offer, but the service should be able to work with the community to develop other functions based on what local people want and need.

10.2 The Scrutiny Committee believe that the council needs to investigate further how it can develop income streams to help offset some of its savings proposal and also consider how it develops sustainable income and support to the service in the long-term. The Scrutiny Committee questioned what work has been done to assess how these key flagship community assets could generate income. Similarly, there needs to be requirement to examine new ways of funding Idea Stores and library services and offsetting the investment in buildings and staff through greater partnership working. Economies and efficiencies cannot simply come from cutting back the library budgets or making transactional savings.

10.3 The Scrutiny Committee cited the co-locating of services housed within the Idea Stores and library services, as often libraries are seen as the 'front door' of the council service. At the time, it was an innovative proposal to develop a new One Stop Shop aligned to the development of a new Watney Market Idea Store in Watney Market to provide lifelong learning opportunities for local residents. The new community facility would enhance the market offer. Value for money was a primary element of the proposal and the co-location of the Watney Market Idea Store and One Stop Shop would enable more effective and efficient delivery of localised services. It was cheaper to link the two developments and joined up working would be improved. The Scrutiny Committee believe that It would be prudent to follow this line of thinking.

10.4 Many library services are already co-located with other partners, colleges, Jobcentres, post offices, citizen advice, tourist information, health centres and many other services. This provides an opportunity to collect sustainable income from renting space whilst increasing the footfall whilst providing an outreach community service. At the time of public service resource constraints, Idea Stores and library services which are well positioned and are considered as the 'front door' to council services could look to expand its assets and use them as venue for police surgeries, health centres and volunteer groups, enabling to share costs, extend opening hours and provide accessible services. There are also opportunities for the council to partner up with government agencies such as the Driving Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) to hold the theory driving test and Home office to support 'Life in the UK tests' and act as a certified test centre.

Recommendation 8

The council, to market and publicise the commercialisation opportunities of the Idea Stores and library services (using its communication channels and advertising space) and to further include engagement with different media groups such as Bangladeshi Language Media, Social Media Influencers and others to help it achieve a wider footfall reach for business opportunities and revenue growth.

11.1 There are significant risks involved if there is no attention to the media as it plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and raising awareness about public libraries and services they provide. Currently there is greater focus on stories about changes to library service provision, library closures and the perceived diminishing role of public libraries due to the internet. There is also a real need to develop positive messages about libraries and the outcomes they support, and reflect these consistently throughout interviews, placed editorial and other media, including online channels.

11.2 The Scrutiny Committee felt that to support the Idea Stores and library services commercialisation and income generation agenda, the council needs to broaden its media and communications network, and to include different media groups which serve the diverse community of Tower Hamlets (as many residents may not be aware of the opportunity to utilise the facilities of Idea Stores and library services). Equally, the Idea Stores and library services may also be positioned to act as gate keeper in promoting business services and development opportunities via its website services.

11.3 Scrutiny Members understand that a significant proportion of the Bangladeshi community obtain their information from media channels such as Channel S and Bangla TV. This should be factored in when developing the campaign and publicity as to how

residents like to receive the information. Over the past few years, there has been a momentous growth with social media influencers, in particular with the younger age group who use this platform as part of gathering information and forming their opinions. Therefore, this could be an important consideration when developing the engagement publicity with specific age groups.

- 11.4 At a local level, Ward Councillors could help to raise public awareness of the Idea Stores and library services as well as signing up to library e-bulletins for filtering to constituents. Councillors could also hold surgeries within the libraries and local MPs should be encouraged to do so. Any publicity and marketing of the Idea Stores and library services needs to be underpinned by a broad media strategy which can reflect commonly agreed messages about the service. In this case, the primary focus should be on publicising of what Idea Stores and library services can do and persuading more people to use them.