

Save Birmingham's response to Birmingham City Council's libraries consultation



July 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your consultation on the future of library services in Birmingham.

The Save Birmingham campaign was launched after Birmingham City Council issued a 'section 114' notice in September 2023. Led by Co-operatives West Midlands with partners from across the local voluntary, community and co-operative sectors, the campaign has mobilised thousands of residents to identify over 200 community places that matter to them – including libraries in every community of Birmingham on savebirmingham.org.

Achieving a rare unanimous vote of support from all political parties represented on Birmingham City Council in November 2023, since we've been working together on shared goals. We've consistently conveyed the strength of feeling of residents, providing constructive challenge – while also offering positive solutions to help address the financial challenges facing Birmingham City Council.

It is in this spirit of seeking solutions that we provide this consultation response.

A citywide community library trust

In its [consultation](#) document, the City Council's preferred option is to move from 36 community libraries run by the City Council (including the Library of Birmingham) to a mixed model of approximately 25 physical sites. Under this approach, the City Council would run new 'community hubs', integrated with early intervention and other services. Residents would also be supported to take on the running of the remaining community libraries, based on local interest and capability.

We consider the council has an opportunity to consider an alternative – creating a citywide community trust. Under this approach, the entire library service would be transferred to a separate organisation, which could be run or owned by workers, the community, or both – based on co-operative values and principles that empower people to be involved in designing the services that they use.

Being operationally separate to the council would enable the trust to secure contracts from the council, which are necessary for the council to meet its duties and the needs of local residents, supported by a paid workforce. At the same time, the trust would be able to access external funding to provide a wider range of services. Additional services could include learning, heritage, cultural and social inclusion services from an array of funders.

Critically, the scale and scope of a citywide trust would enable a more comprehensive and equitable service across the entire city, ensuring no community is left behind.

While a citywide trust may be seen as a radical departure from the current situation, the level of change is helped by the fact that:

- Birmingham is not alone – local councils as diverse as Devon (Libraries Unlimited), York (Explore) and Nottinghamshire (Inspire) have adopted versions of this approach, empowering residents, transforming services and delivering sustainable finances.
- Birmingham has been here before – around 10 years ago, the City Council explored a similar mutual model – the 93-page business plan is still on the council's [website](#).

For both of these reasons, implementation costs can be minimised, helping to meet budgetary targets in a timely manner while maximising the benefits of these models.

We are happy to share further details about how these alternatives could work in practice, drawing on the experience of creating similar models in other parts of the country. **We call on the City Council to explicitly consider this alternative option in the later stages of its consultation, due later this year.**

Working constructively together

If it intends to adopt its preferred mixed delivery model, **we strongly encourage Birmingham City Council to work with communities to fully take part in the process, working together to maximise the chances of success.**

We welcome the council's recognition of the role of community asset transfers, which we have advocated as a positive solution since we launched our campaign. Done right, they can save community assets, empower residents and transform local areas. However, we note from considerable experience that community asset transfers are not straightforward and community groups need significant support and time to take advantage of this model – especially diverse communities that require additional support and capacity building.

In this context, Birmingham City Council must work with local communities right across the city, providing sufficient time for community development, as well as financial resources where appropriate, as part of any asset disposal strategy. Changes to the library service should not be considered in isolation from the rest of the council's community asset portfolio, considering each community in the round and taking advantage of colocation or partnership opportunities.

Save Birmingham and its partners have already started engaging communities – **we are willing to work with Birmingham City Council to facilitate further community engagement, building on existing relationships, projects and shared ambitions.**

Thank you for your consideration, and we are happy to discuss our response.

Yours sincerely

Jeevan Jones
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Save Birmingham