



Staffing hours 'should be increased' at our libraries

By Daphne Chamberlain

"We have great news! The Barnet Library review accepts our core concerns about unstaffed libraries, and makes clear that action is needed. Thank you to those who took part. It worked!"

That was the reaction from Save Barnet Libraries to an independent survey into the borough's restructured library service. The report went to a Barnet Council committee meeting within 24 hours of a demonstration outside East Finchley library in March, celebrating World Book Day and demanding "Make Our Dreams Come True".

The dream of the mainly very young demonstrators was for greater access to their local library. For most of the time libraries are unstaffed, when access for children is only possible in the company of an over 16-year-old with a registered PIN card. Many adults, including people with disabilities, do not use the libraries then either. The report recommended

an increase in staffed service hours, and increased use of volunteers. The level of volunteering is lower than in other boroughs.

East Finchley library was the branch used most often by people answering the survey. Compilers of the report put on record that they were "struck by the passionate commitment shown by people who use libraries, and by the staff who serve them".

Mystery shopper

As well as a general residents' survey, there was a targeted questionnaire for 11-18s, visits to every library, plus 'mystery shopper' visits to some, two public meetings, visits to focus groups, personal interviews and consideration of data.

The report had some kind words for Barnet Council, remarking on their "refreshing attitude" to hard feedback, but making firm recommendations. It found that greater investment was needed in design and signage, and that some branches



Need to read: Children and parents demonstrate in the rain outside East Finchley library. Photo Mike Coles

were very short on space. They also found a significant failure to implement the new visitor count technology, making statistics for library visits unreliable.

Tying in with the most fre-

quent complaints from people interviewed, there were recommendations for two pilot schemes relating to self-service hours: toilets to be kept open before deciding on whether to make this permanent, and

the age-limit for access to be reduced, subject to parents' permission.

The vexed subject of commercial space in the libraries wasn't in the remit of the investigating group.



Pavement protest: 'Chewing gum man' street artist Ben Wilson showed his support with Emily Burnham of the Save Barnet Libraries group. Photo Mike Coles.

Health club shuts down in the face of power supply problems

On the first Friday of March clients of The Manor Health Club in Fortis Green found it was closed. In addition to the disappointment at not being able to exercise, subsequent social media comments showed their frustration at a lack of communication. Notices were put on the front door and eventually this message appeared on the club's website:

"UK Power Networks has now reconnected the electricity, however, the air quality still has to be tested, along with various plumbing and electrical circuitry equipment.

"We have to make sure all is working before we can reopen the gym. We appreciate your patience and apologise for the inconvenience and please appreciate that this matter is still out of our hands.

"As you will be aware we had to take the decision to temporarily close the club following electrical problems and release of hazardous fumes. This was caused by works external from the club undertaken by outside contractors not connected to us. "We are taking steps to make sure we can reopen as soon as possible but this must only be when it is safe to do so. We will update you as soon as we can and hope that this is resolved soon.



Temporarily out of action: The Manor Health Club

"We care for the health and safety of our staff and members. We apologise for any inconvenience but this is a matter out of our control."

Re-opening delayed

A club member received an email explaining that it was not just the air testing. Difficulties with boilers and pumps caused by the electrical problems needed to be fixed before the

club could open again. It said that once the club was back open, members would be compensated with time lost.

A message on the club's phone line apologised and thanked members for their loyalty. At the time of going to press, The Manor remained shut, along with all gyms and leisure centres, as part of the coronavirus lockdown.

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