

## Review of Shirley Library

### Summary

Shirley Library is one of the smaller libraries in the network on a main road and close to Shirley's shopping parade. The performance of the library is comparatively poor, reflecting in part the move to part-time opening but also historic levels of performance.

This library is one of the four that the Cabinet meeting on 31 January 2024 was recommended to consider for closure. This proposal was then consulted on as part of a wider set of proposals and the feedback informs this evaluation.

**Table C4.21: performance, location and building data**

Performance	Total	Rank	Location	Rating
Opening hours (pw)	16	9	Visibility	
Library visits (pa)	12,918	13	Footfall	
Library issues	14,003	11	Public transport access	
Event attendances	1,106	12	<b>Building</b>	
PC hours in use	979	11	Suitability	
Budget (£)	110,470	11	Adaptability	
Cost per visitor (£)	9	3	Condition	
Active users	855	11	Internal area (m <sup>2</sup> )	279

### Performance

Shirley Library performance on every service measure is amongst the poorest three in the network. Its number of visits is the lowest and most of the other measures are third lowest, except event attendances which is second lowest. The cost per visit at £9 is third highest.

The library has found it hard to recover usage levels from before the COVID pandemic and the reduction in opening hours. In comparison with 2023-24, issues were only 48% of the level in 2019-20, visits 41% and active users 40%.

### Location

Shirley Library is on the corner of the junction between the busy Wickham Road and Hartland Way. In front of the library is a lawn with a large, mature tree. Set back somewhat from the pavement, the library and its limited signage are obscured.

The library is just the other side of the road at the quieter end of the small shopping parade on Wickham Road. The busiest section of the shopping parade is a little distance from the library. The library may benefit from being close to the parade as shoppers can easily incorporate a visit to the shops with a visit to the library. However, the

parade appears to cater for convenience shopping and is unlikely to generate a high degree of footfall that the library could benefit from.

The library is in an area which, to the south and west, has generous open spaces, school playing fields, parks and sports grounds. As a result, the library's catchment area has a low density of population.

There are good bus links on Wickham Road and its location allows for relatively safe walking and cycling.

### Building

The building is of a simple art deco design from the 1930s which was extended in the 1980s to create a children's library area. The side elevation of the library is in reasonable condition, but redecoration is required of parts of the exterior.

In the interior, the glass ceiling with leaded light detailing is striking. Other aspects of the interior are less attractive, with functional furniture and shelving. The glass ceiling appears to have suffered from water damage and discolouration and the overall décor is in reasonable condition, albeit dull.

The building is a small branch library, which benefits from a separate children's library area and large tables for group activities. Due to its size there is limited scope for making use of the library for events and other activities and the shelving is fixed. As a result, the building is not able to provide a full library offer.

There is no accessible toilet available and limited space for creating this facility (the public currently go up a step into the staff area and use staff toilets).

### Population and need

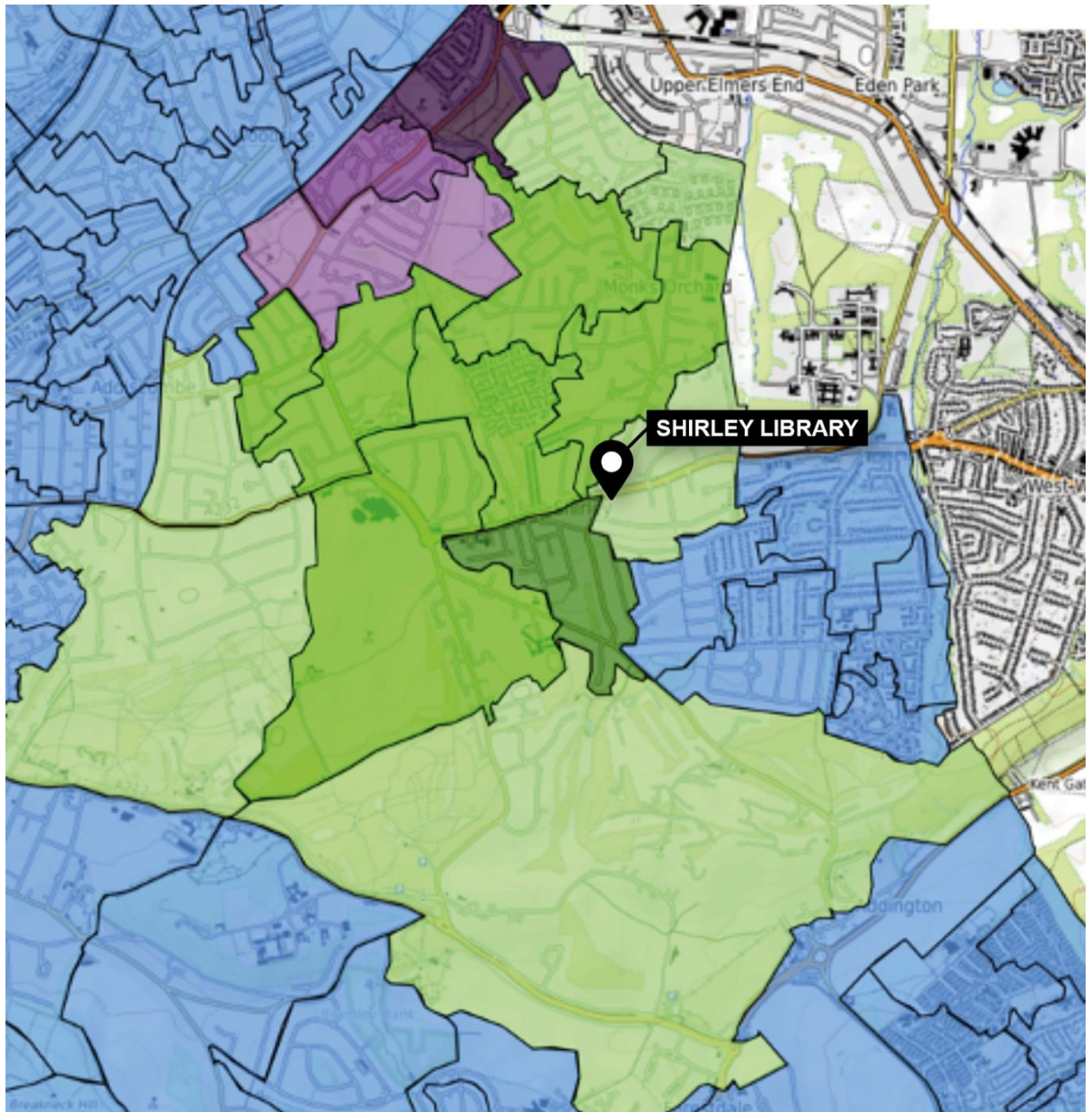
The population in the geographic catchment area is towards the lower end of the range among libraries in the network. The pattern of deprivation is mixed. It includes two LSOAs in the 20% most deprived in England for the overall IMD. On the other hand, 13 of the 16 LSOAs in the catchment area are in the least deprived 40%. This pattern is repeated with 3 or 4 LSOAs in or near the 20% most deprived IMD subsets for income deprivation and employment. These LSOAs cover the Longheath Gardens, Long Lane & Milford Gardens estate to the north of the catchment area and the Shrublands Estate to the south.

**Table C4.22: summary of population, need and community**

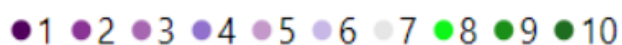
Criterion	Sub-criterion	Level
Catchment	OA population within 1 mile	24,302
	OA population within 1.25 miles	33,010
	LSOAs in 20% most deprived	2
Alternative provision	Nearest libraries (miles)	Ashburton Library (1.2) West Wickham (1.4)

	Schools within 1km	4
Community use	Existing community group uses	6
	Number of volunteers	4

**Figure C4.32: overall IMD deprivation by LSOA decile in 1 mile catchment area**

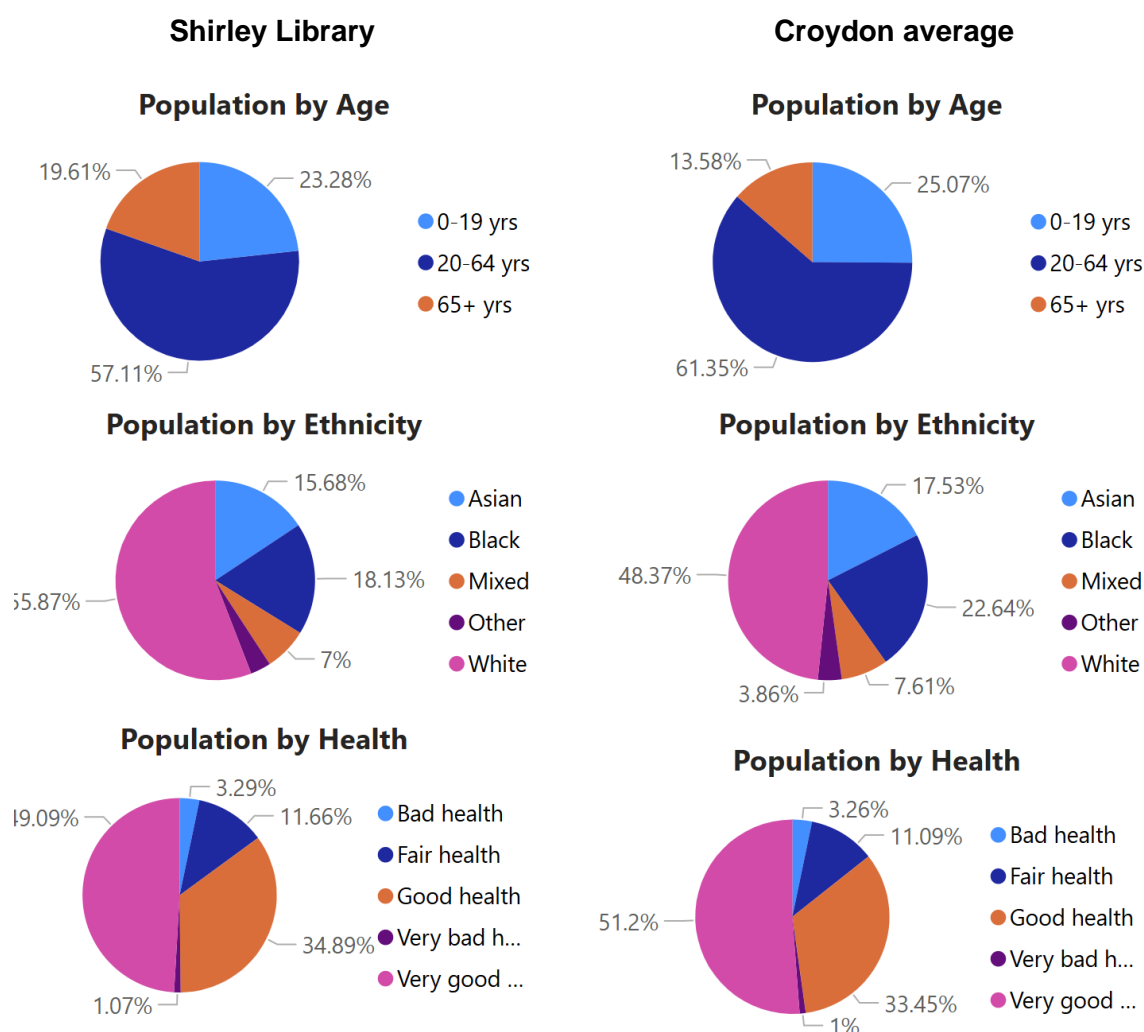


**Legend for deciles (1 represents the most deprived 10% of LSOAs in England)**



There is a significantly higher proportion of people over the age of 65 in the catchment at 20% compared with the borough average of 14%. The proportion of the population of White ethnic origin is significantly higher than the borough average with somewhat lower levels of the other categories.

**Figure C4.33: population data for catchment area (LSOA)**



*Considering the potential for closure*

Shirley Library was recommended to be considered for closure in the January 2024 report to Cabinet because:

- i. The library has, historically, performed poorly and continues to do so.
- ii. The building is small, requires investment and is unsuitable for the full range of the library service offer.

There are two libraries within one and a half miles of the Shirley Library site.

- iii. The catchment area overlaps to a large degree with that of Ashburton Library and, to an extent with West Wickham Library.

Ashburton Library was recommended to be retained given its performance levels, location and size and this would become the main library for most of those currently in the Addiscombe and Shirley areas.

Shirley Library users expressed strong opposition to the closure during the consultation. There was extensive feedback, making many points similar to those made in response to other closure proposals. These included more general points, eg about the potential for recruiting more volunteers, which are addressed in the main report at Appendix A.

There were many comments and feedback specific to Shirley Library, which are summarised as:

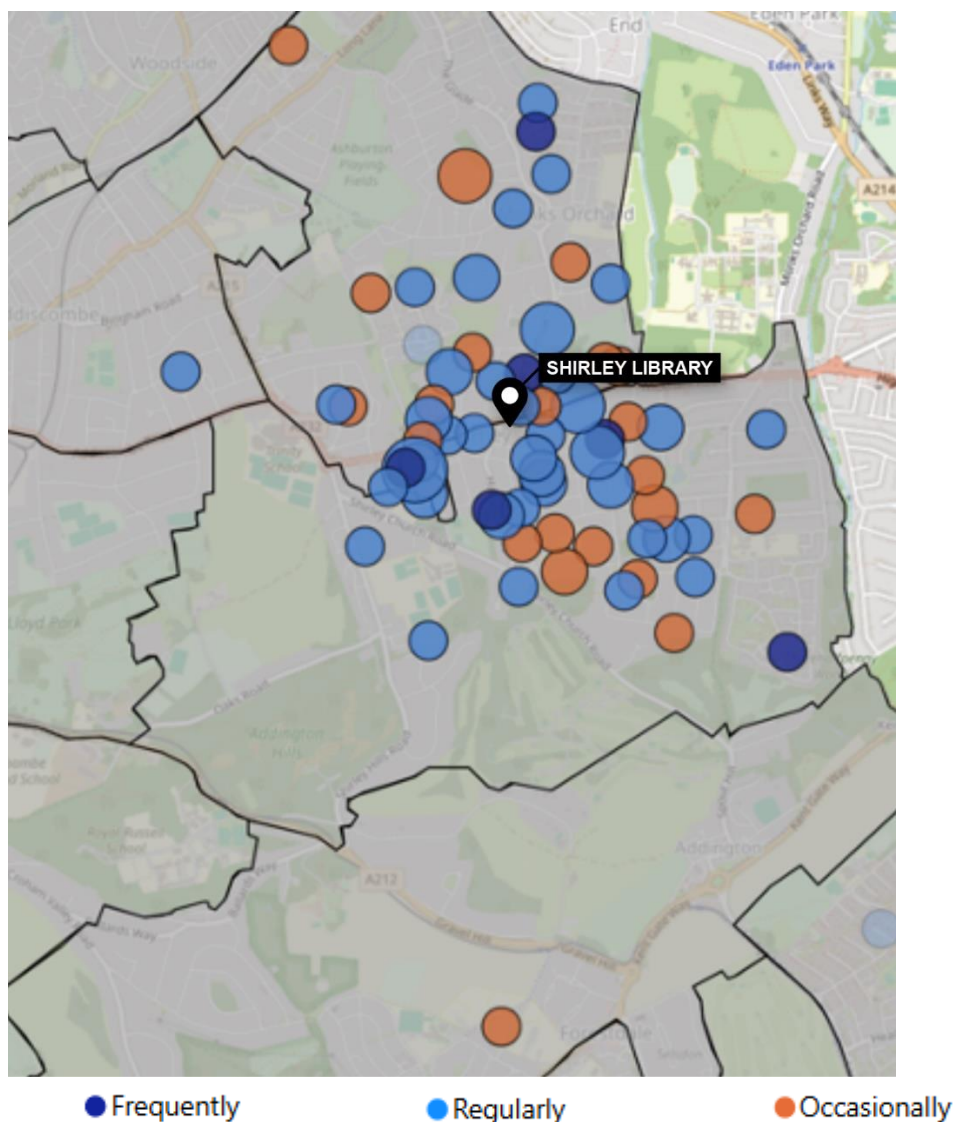
- iv. **Travel to Ashburton Library is difficult** by bus, particularly for older people and the library is not suitable (being in a secondary school).
- v. **It is unfair to sacrifice Shirley Library** (in order to open Ashburton Library for longer) as residents should be able to expect some service in return for their council tax.
- vi. **The service has been run down** through cuts in staffing and hours; closing on Saturday and after 6pm; not investing in the building and not promoting it.
- vii. **Support is needed for people in Shrublands** who are in dire need and cannot afford books.
- viii. **While books are important, the library service is about more** as it gives people access to computers and training and support and access to culture.
- ix. **It will have an adverse social and health impact** on its users and increase isolation, particularly among older people.
- x. **The library is a safe, warm space** for people that is open to everyone.
- xi. **It will deprive children and young people and their parents** of resources and services and life chances.
- xii. **The library and its activities play an important community role** as the only public building in the area.

**Parts of Shirley Library's catchment area are not well served by public transport.**

**However, there are various bus routes from the wider catchment area to Ashburton Library, but these can require a walk to or from bus stops or a change of bus.** To reach Ashburton from the current location of Shirley Library a change of bus is required or the less frequent 367 can be used. Using a bus will be a practical option and free for children and over-60s but will incur a cost for those not eligible for free or discounted bus travel. This may be a deterrent for those on low incomes, although this will not be so much of an issue in the less deprived areas of Shirley.

Users of Shirley Library were well-represented among respondents to the consultation survey with 318 responses. The survey asked which library they would use if Shirley Library were to be closed. 44% said that they would not be able to use another library service if Shirley Library closed. 28% said that they would use Ashburton Library, 21% would use a library outside the borough and 18% would use Central Library. 3% said they would use Croydon's library online. The postcode locations of the 44% who reported that they would not be able to use another library service are shown below.

**Figure C4.34: respondents who cannot use another library and frequency of use<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> This map shows the postcodes of those who responded to the consultation survey and reported that this library is their principal library; that they could not use another library; and how often they used it. 'Frequently' means more than once a week; 'Regularly' means every once a week to once a month; 'Occasionally' means every few months or once a year.

Their reasons will vary. There is free on-street parking in the area around Ashburton Library although finding a nearby space can be difficult and so this will not be suitable for people with mobility difficulties. There are no designated disabled bays on the busy road outside the Library. They may find public transport difficult to use because of mobility challenges or the distance to suitable buses and the changes sometimes required.

They may also be deterred by the library being located in the same building as the secondary school, Oasis Academy Shirley Park. Encountering large numbers of secondary school children at the end of the school day can feel intimidating particularly if behaviour is bad. An example cited by a consultee of being struck by a ball may be a one-off or as part of a pattern.

Ofsted's most recent inspection in 2019<sup>2</sup> concluded that "The behaviour of pupils is good" and pupils are 'polite and courteous' when speaking to visitors to the school. They add that in recreational time, "the vast majority of pupils manage their behaviour well". This inspection report is a few years' old and student behaviour standards can change and while a vast majority may behave well, that could leave a small minority who don't. Library staff across the service have experience of dealing with difficult behaviour by young people (and adults) and will escalate bad behaviour to a school's management if the students' school can be identified. Where school student behaviour at Ashburton Library has been more challenging, this has been raised with the management at the school and action has been taken.

As set out in the EQIA at Appendix D, it is recognised that travel to Ashburton Library can be harder from some parts of the Shirley catchment area, particularly for those with mobility difficulties due to age or disability. **So for those who cannot easily travel to an alternative library, the library service is proposing to arrange a bus to collect residents from Shirley Library to travel to Ashburton Library** which would host existing regular activities such as Rhymetimes, the reading group, knitting groups, etc to ensure residents can continue these activities if they cannot be moved to an accessible local venue.

**In challenging the rationale for considering Shirley Library for closure**, arguments included criticism of the condition of the library and the standard of the interior and furniture and the lack of an accessible toilet. It was argued that there had not been an investment in refurbishment, in contrast to other libraries in the network. It was also argued that, given the level of council tax paid, the residents should be entitled to the service.

As acknowledged below, the library is valued by consultees as an important local asset, but its performance is low on all indicators. Its performance has been a long-standing issue, even before the sharp cut in opening hours.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Ofsted school report on Oasis Academy Shirley Park 2019.

Even when open for 44.5 hours per week in 2019-20, the library had the lowest number of visits of the thirteen libraries and had visits per hour of just 14, in comparison with a median of 25 (at Coulsdon). In 2018-19, Shirley Library had an average of 2,143 active users, the fourth lowest level. The other three libraries that had fewer active users in 2018-19 are also recommended for closure in this report.

There are active users who make good use of the library but they represent just 3.5% of the population in the catchment area. Also, given that the measure of active users is of those who use the services measured *once or more in the preceding 12 months*, this generally represents a low level of usage. This is not unique to Shirley Library as, for example, New Addington's (which is open 3 days a week) proportion of active users in its population is similar at 3.8% and Broad Green's lower at 1.5%.

There are libraries which have some indicators that are lower and there is one library which is being recommended for retention which on some important measures performs worse than Shirley Library. **New Addington has lower levels of issues and a higher cost per visit (£10 compared with Shirley's £9), but much higher levels of active users, event attendance and PC usage and its larger size allows it to provide a wider offer.** Also, as pointed out earlier in this report. New Addington serves a catchment area with higher levels of deprivation and is some distance further from alternative libraries.

The proposal to close Shirley Library is designed to allow the service to reinvest in improving the opening hours at other libraries and to introduce resources for outreach and communication. The figures in the review of Ashburton Library earlier in this report point to the size of the population in its catchment area and a general level of deprivation that is higher than in Shirley Library's. Ashburton's size (and historic performance) will better enable it to reach an even wider audience if it can offer longer opening hours.

**The service at Shirley Library has indeed declined further since the COVID pandemic and the sharp reduction in opening hours.** The challenge of keeping 13 libraries open on a part-time basis means that the service does not have the resources to open on Saturdays nor in the evening. Neither are there the resources required to actively promote the service or run a full programme of events across the network. This would change with the library service's proposed new model using the resources created by closing some libraries.

**The proposed closures also free up resources to introduce outreach services,** targeting those most in need, many of whom do not currently take advantage of the support that a library service can offer. The library service, as part of the proposed changes, is planning the delivery of a local outreach service including exploring opportunities with partners suggested during the consultation (West Wickham and Shirley Baptist Church, Shirley Children's Centre, Shirley Community Centre and local care homes and sheltered accommodation settings) with a particular focus on reaching residents on the Shrublands estate.



To test the outreach model, the service is planning a pilot of outreach at West Wickham & Shirley Baptist Church, 0.8 miles from Shirley Library in support of their existing successful community offer available to all residents which already includes activities for early years children and older people. This will include activity and resources designed to meet the needs of priority age groups for family activities and for older people. This service is also a similar distance from the Shrublands estate as the current library. Some of the other opportunities suggested in consultation that will be researched are closer to the Shrublands Estate.

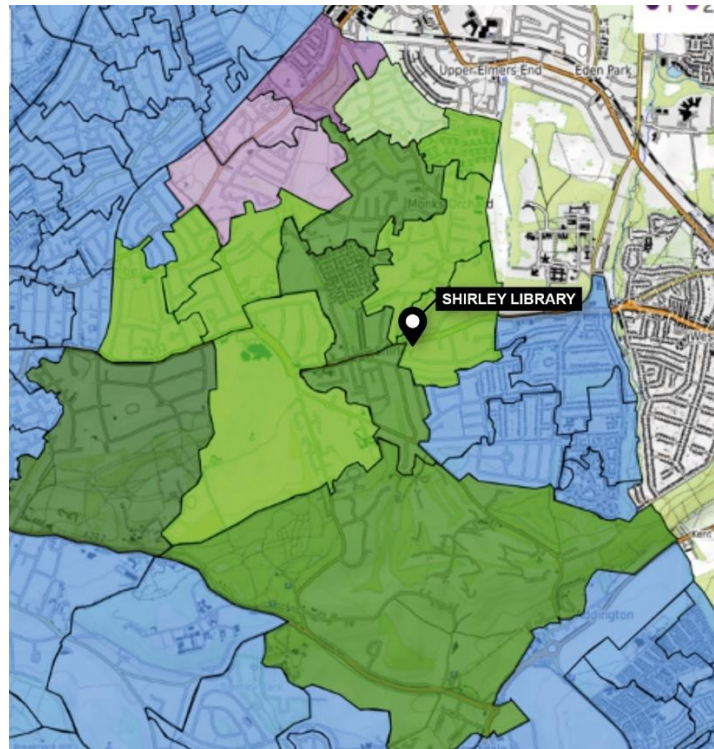
Libraries should be more than repositories of books (which do remain core to the service) and this is recognised in the library service's commitment to the Libraries Connected universal offers (see the summary in section 2 of the main review report, Appendix A) and its plans to make libraries the focus for an expanded cultural programme.

Part of the universal offer is giving people access to the digital world, hence the provision of PCs in library and training support. Usage levels of the PCs at Shirley Library are comparatively low and Ashburton Library provides a good number of PCs. With longer opening hours (it is already open on Saturdays), Ashburton Library will be able to give more people access, including Shirley Library users.

**The closure of a much-loved library could have an impact on the health and wellbeing of many of its regular users, including older people.** As argued in the consultation feedback, libraries can help to reduce isolation and offer a warm space to enjoy company what the library has to offer.

The consultation feedback highlighted the potential impact of closure on health and well-being. Averages will mask individual suffering in health, mental health and disability, but on the IMD measure of deprivation for health and disability, the catchment area suffers from relatively low levels of deprivation. As illustrated below, of the 21 LSOAs in the catchment area, none were in the two least deprived deciles and 16 of the LSOAs are in the 40% least deprived in England.

**Figure C4.35: Health Deprivation and Disability by LSOA decile in 1 mile catchment area**



**Legend for deciles (1 represents the most deprived 10% of LSOAs in England)**



That overall picture should not mask the impact on individuals. Its potential impact on users and older people is recognised in the EQIA (see Appendix D) which has recommended mitigations focusing on outreach. This would involve moving existing hosted and library-run activities at Shirley Library to nearby local venues that have been suggested through the consultation that might be willing to host some services. Once there is a continuity of regular activities established, library staff would begin setting up a community collection based on local requirements.

This collection will be maintained by the outreach team once it is in place (expected April 2025), Library staff would also have an increased library presence at events, health settings, schools and education settings to promote the library offer and provide support with digital access. There will be further engagement with local schools and nurseries, sheltered accommodation, care homes and community groups as the service develops.

The proposal to establish accessible transport would enable current activities that are important to the health and well-being of Shirley Library's current users to continue in new locations. The increase in opening hours at Ashburton Library would also enable users of Shirley Library to benefit from a more extensive offer.

**The impact of the closure on children and young people and young families was highlighted in feedback** given the importance of providing books and other resources for young people, particularly the most deprived. The value of the library as a place to study and for school visits was also highlighted. Children and young people are well-represented among the library's users and some contributed at the consultation drop-in sessions; few responded to the survey (a common issue in public consultation).

Of the active users of the library over the last 2 years, 34% were in the age bracket 0 to 19 and the EQIA acknowledges the potential impact of closure on them. It has highlighted the current impact of part-time opening on children and young people, including the most vulnerable, who want to use libraries in the area.

Young people in the Shirley catchment area will be able to make use of their travel passes to use buses to reach Ashburton Library (and West Wickham Library) for free and they will be able to take advantage (whether on their own or with the help of their parents) of a wider offer in a larger venue that is open more often. For those less able to travel or too young to travel on their own, the outreach offer will still provide access to collections in community venues.

The resources freed up by the closure will enable the library service to undertake more engagement with schools. Although many schools (as pointed out elsewhere in the consultation feedback) have their own school libraries, primary schools in particular value library staff's contribution to their curriculum through visits and tie-ups with programmes such as the Summer Reading Challenge. Library outreach work targeting children and young people will enable the library service to reach more than they currently can with their stretched resources, particularly the overwhelming majority of children and young people who are not currently making use of what the library offers.

**The role of Shirley Library as a valued local asset for the local community was highlighted in consultation.** It was argued that is the only public building that is open to everyone.

The library service recognises the value of a local library to a community and the review is aiming to increase the overall take-up of libraries as community hubs across the communities of Croydon and particularly among those most in need.

Although closures will be a blow for the users that want to retain them, the increase in opening hours elsewhere and the introduction of outreach activities across the borough, but particularly in areas affected by closure will increase the capacity of the service, making more efficient use of the larger libraries that are able to provide a broader service offer.

There was some interest expressed in the potential for the community to take over the management of the building. The library service is proposing that the vacant building would be made available for community organisations to take on the management of the building if they can demonstrate a sound and sustainable business plan.

There is recognition on all sides that it may be difficult for a voluntary organisation to generate the funds to support such a building so some initial funding would be made available. The harnessing of voluntary effort and the potential for investing in the site could generate even greater community commitment and cohesion, but consultees also expressed scepticism whether this would be realistic.

**Given the current and historically poor performance of the Shirley Library, determined in part by the building and its location, and exacerbated by part-time opening, retaining it is not efficient, given the small numbers served and its unit costs.**

Shirley Library is also only 1.2 miles from Ashburton Library and 1.4 miles from West Wickham Library (a library previously visited by Shirley residents before its refurbishment). As a result Shirley's 1-mile catchment area overlaps that of both Ashburton and West Wickham.

The library shares some of its geographic catchment area with Ashburton Library. The east of Shirley Library's catchment area is also close to West Wickham Library (currently undergoing refurbishment) in Bromley. Shirley residents are not restricted to using Croydon libraries. Therefore, residents can apply for membership of Bromley libraries to give them access to the nearby West Wickham library. West Wickham library is currently closed for refurbishment and due to reopen in 2025, in the meantime there is a temporary library at 77 Addington Road. It is likely that West Wickham is used for shopping by many residents in Shirley and so this could be convenient for them. The ability to use West Wickham Library is not currently marketed to Croydon residents as an option and so, as a courtesy, the library service should consult the Bromley library service before any active promotion of that library before it reopens.

The impact of the recommended library closures is recognised in the EQIA at Appendix D. A range of mitigations is proposed that will address many of these impacts and even introduce new services that will enable it to address the needs of the overwhelming majority of people in the borough and Shirley Library catchment area who are not currently taking advantage of the service.

### *Findings and recommendations*

Given its small size, its building and its poor performance and high unit costs, it is recommended that Shirley Library is closed:

- xiii. Shirley Library's comparative performance and unit costs are poor and usage was comparatively low even when the library was open full-time.
- xiv. Shirley Library's catchment area overlaps with Ashburton Library's (and West Wickham Library's).
- xv. Ashburton Library has the capacity, particularly when open for more days, to provide a full service offer to users of Shirley Library.

- xvi. Mitigation is planned which will provide transport access for those who find it difficult to reach Ashburton Library and outreach at community locations.
- xvii. The catchment area has several areas which are among the most deprived in England that will need particular attention and support.
- xviii. Discussions would be needed with Bromley Council before the new West Wickham Library was actively marketed as an option for Croydon residents.

The impacts and mitigations are described further in the EQIA at Appendix D.

Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>2. That Shirley Library is closed to allow for the reinvestment of resources in neighbouring libraries and in library outreach in the Shirley area.</li><li>3. That the mitigations summarised above and in the EQIA be implemented.</li><li>4. That Bromley Council's library service be consulted before actively promoting to residents in Shirley the option of using West Wickham Library.</li><li>5. That an accessible bus transport is provided to enable users with access needs to use services at other libraries.</li><li>6. That the library service engage with Oasis Academy to address any concerns about the behaviour of students and safe access and entry into Ashburton Library.</li></ul>

*Excerpt from Cabinet Report (25 September 2024), Appendix C Library service review Review of closure proposals compiled by Activist Consultants for Croydon Libraries.*  
<https://democracy.croydon.gov.uk/documents/q3920/Public%20reports%20pack%2025th-Sep-2024%2018.30%20Cabinet.pdf?T=10>