

Review of Sanderstead Library

Summary

Sanderstead Library is one of the smallest libraries and is located in a residential area of Sanderstead within a catchment area with some of the lowest levels of deprivation in England. While most of its performance indicators are comparatively low, the level of issues is fourth highest in the network.

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 C4.17: performance, location and building data

Performance	Total	Rank	Location	Rating
Opening hours (pw)	24	3	Visibility	
Library visits (pa)	22,554	8	Footfall	
Library issues	34,948	4	Public transport access	
Event attendances	1,317	11	Building	
PC hours in use	770	12	Suitability	
Budget (£)	131,112	9	Adaptability	
Cost per visitor (£)	6	9	Condition	
Active users	1,139	9	Internal area (m ²)	260

Performance

The library is open three days a week and its issues are just below the median and the cost per visit at £6 is lower than the median (£7). However, attendances at events are below median and PC hours in use are particularly low (representing only 1.3% of all PC hours across the network) probably reflecting the relative prosperity of the area.

Library issues are particularly high for the size of the library and the ratio of annual issues to active users at 31 is the highest in the network, ie Sanderstead Library's average active user borrowed 31 items in 2023-24.

Its rate of recovery from COVID and the reduction in opening hours has been good, with footfall in 2023/24 being 64% of the level in 2019-20, higher than the recovery rate for the whole library network at 47%.

Location

Sanderstead Library is set on a prominent corner position on the heavily trafficked Sanderstead Hill at a junction with the road Farm Fields but is only partially visible as the building is set back from road and is partly hidden by an impressive, mature tree when in full leaf.

There are no nearby shops or leisure facilities to generate footfall. The library is located in a residential area which, to the east and west, has generous open spaces, including a golf course. This means that its geographic catchment area has a relatively low population density compared with the north of the borough. As a result, this is a poor location for a library, although convenient for residents who live nearby as the distribution of active users indicates (see figure C4.n below).

There is a bus route on Sanderstead Hill and free on-street parking on Farm Fields. The location allows for relatively safe walking and cycling, but the steep hill on the main road may be a deterrent for pedestrians with mobility difficulties or for parents with pushchairs.

Building

The library was constructed in the 1930s and is an interesting brick-built design over two storeys. The main library space on the ground floor has high ceilings and large windows at either end but its interior is small. In front of the library is a sizeable garden with a large, mature tree and is an attractive space with a picnic bench in the shade of the tree.

The main library building appears to be in reasonable condition externally. The grassed area appears well maintained by the Friends of Sanderstead Library who to keep the grounds in a good condition (and who donated the bench) and the WI who maintain the rose garden.

While aspects of the building are impressive, the entrance to the library is plain and unadorned, providing limited visibility of the inside of the building. The interior of the library is cluttered and dull, with functional furniture and shelving, but light floods into the library from the two windows at either end. The main library space is fully utilised although the counter area takes up more space than necessary and the basement rooms are cramped and not easily incorporated into the library. The children's library area is not separated off. There is no accessible public toilet.

The small size of the library and its design restrict the range of library services that can be offered.

Population and need

The population in the catchment area for the library is relatively low within a 1-mile radius.

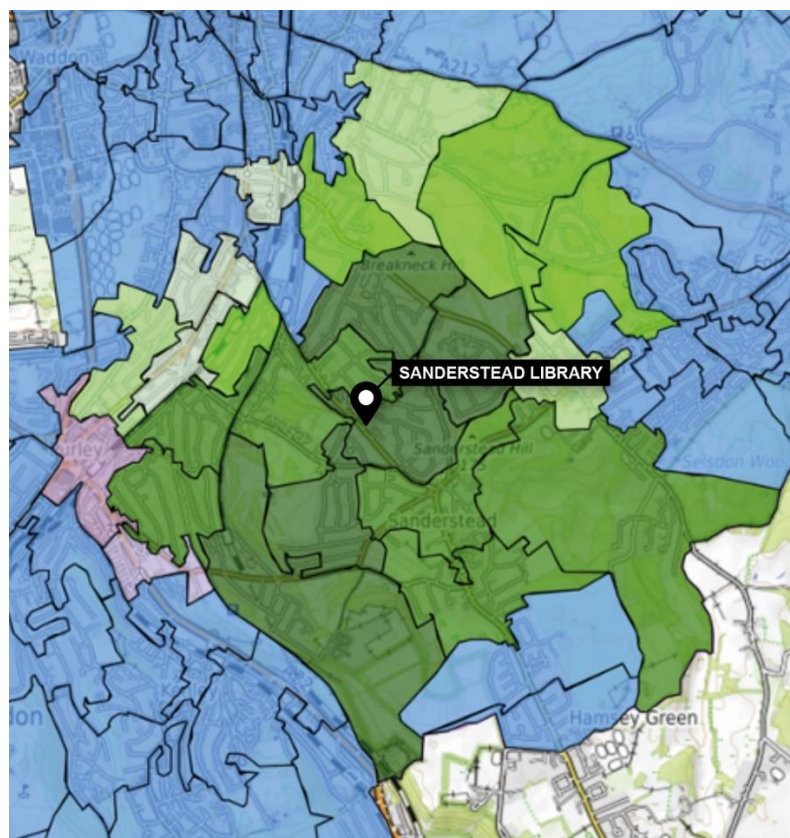
The library is also close to two other libraries, particularly Selsdon Library with which it shares a sizeable proportion of its catchment area using a 1-mile radius.

Table C4.18: summary of population, need and community

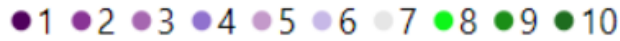
Criterion	Sub-criterion	Level
Catchment	OA population within 1 mile	22,473
	OA population within 1.25 miles	37,653
	LSOAs in 20% most deprived	0
Alternative provision	Nearest libraries (miles)	Selsdon Library (1.3) Purley Library (1.9)
	Schools within 1km	1
Community use	Existing community group uses	2
	Number of volunteers	5

Using the overall IMD measure of deprivation, the catchment area has no LSOAs in the five most deprived deciles of LSOAs in England. 11 LSOAs of its 23 LSOAs (ie nearly half) are in the two least deprived deciles in England. This pattern of low levels of deprivation is reflected in most of the subsets of the IMD and we will include further examples below. It should be noted that the *IMD levels of deprivation are indicators of average levels of deprivation in a locality*. There will, of course, be individual households whose circumstances diverge from the average for the LSOA in which they live.

Figure C4.25: overall IMD deprivation by LSOA decile in 1 mile catchment area

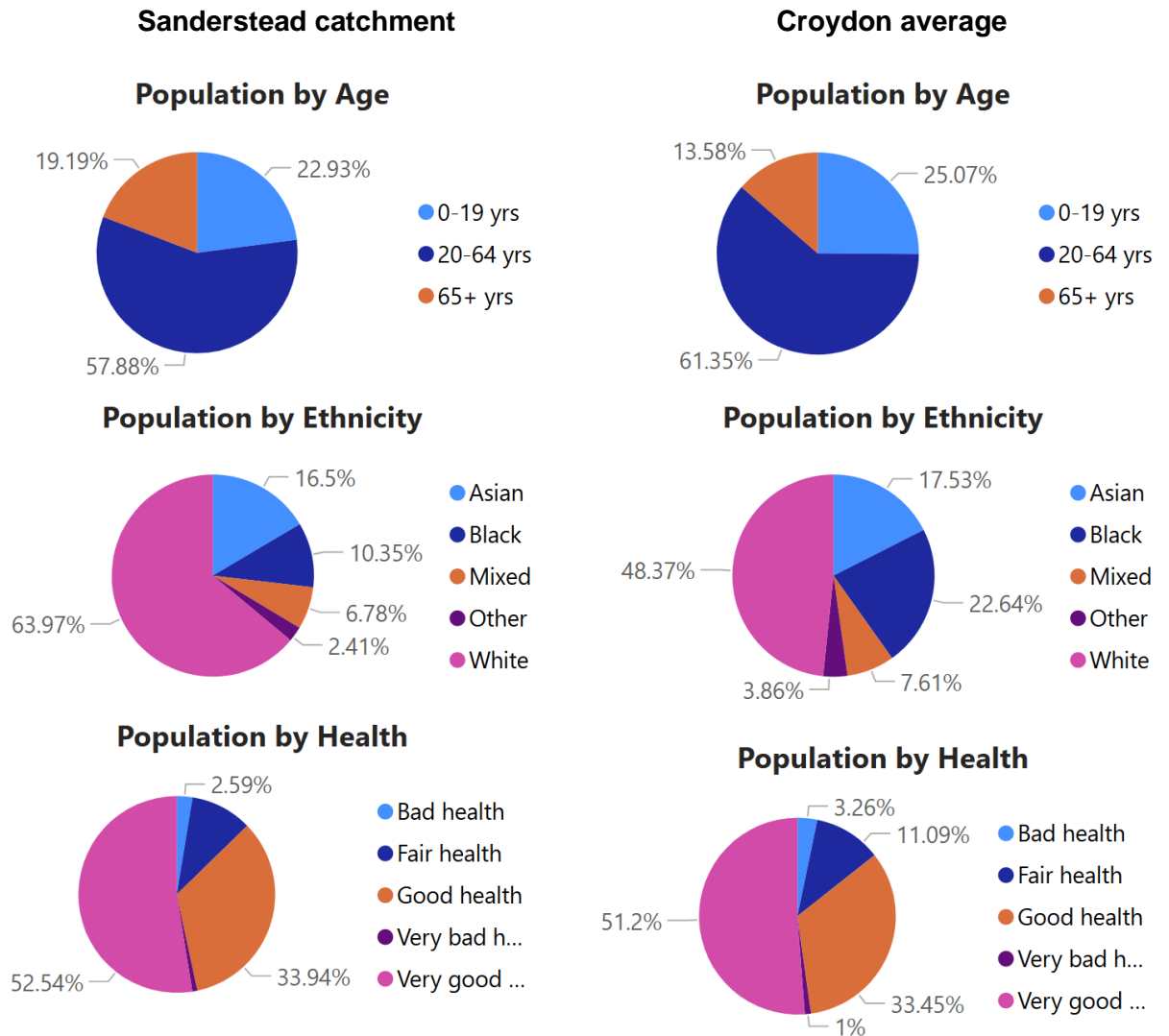


Legend for deciles (1 represents the most deprived 10% of LSOAs in England)



Compared with the average for Croydon, the catchment area's population has a significantly higher proportion of people who are over-65. It has a significantly higher proportion of people of White ethnicity, and lower of people of Black ethnicity. For the data on people classified as in 'very bad' or 'bad' ill health, the catchment area has the lowest percentage in a range between 3.4% and 5.8%.

Figure C4.26: population data for library catchment area (LSOA)



Considering the potential for closure

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

- i. The location of the library does not benefit from busy footfall.
- ii. The building is small and unsuitable for the full range of the library service offer.
- iii. The catchment area has a comparatively small population with low levels of deprivation.
- iv. The catchment area overlaps to a large degree with that of Selsdon Library.

Selsdon 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 Sanderstead Library catchment area.

The level of feedback during consultation arguing against closure was high and demonstrated the deep commitment of its users and community to the library. There was extensive feedback, much of it making similar points in response to other closure proposals. These included more general points, eg about the Council's management of its finances and its service priorities, which are addressed in the main report at Appendix A.

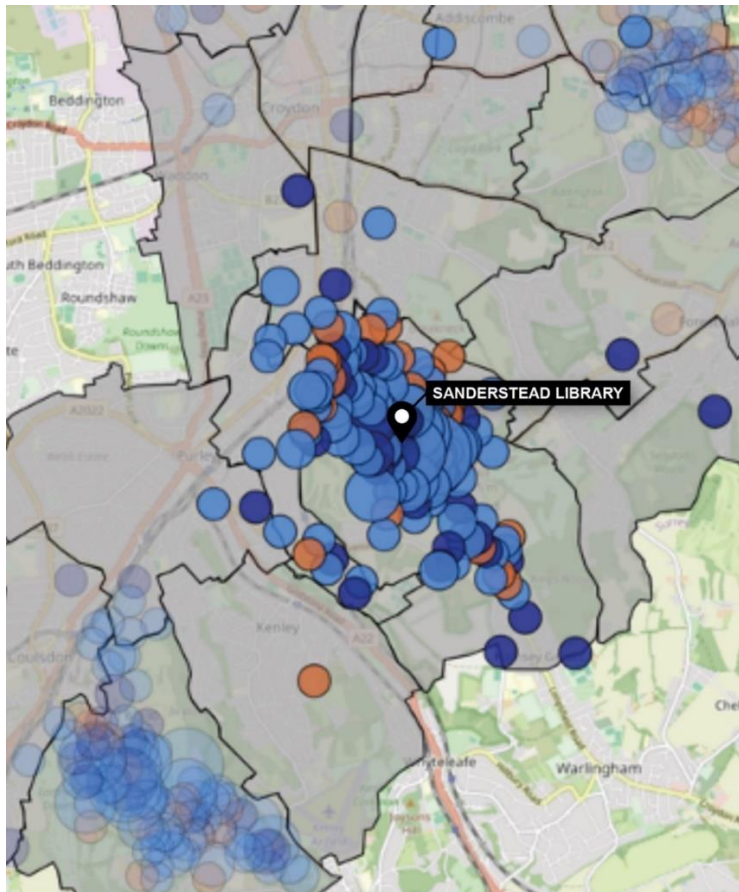
There were a range of comments and feedback specific to Sanderstead which are summarised as follows:

- v. **Travel to Selsdon or Purley is difficult** either by bus or car for those with young children and those with mobility difficulties, eg due to pregnancy, age or disability.
- vi. **It is unfair to select this library for closure** (as opposed to Purley, for example) as it performs well and ranks fourth in the number of issues of books and other materials.
- vii. **It will have an adverse social and health impact** on its users and increase isolation.
- viii. **It will deprive children and young people** of a safe and accessible place to enjoy books, reading and learning.
- ix. **The library and its activities play an important community role** as the only public building in the area.

It was pointed out that it is easy to park at Sanderstead Library as the on-street parking is free and it is relatively easy to find a space. This is especially important for older people who form a higher proportion of the population than in other parts of the borough. The steep hills in the area also make walking difficult.

Users of Sanderstead Library were well-represented among respondents to the consultation survey with 555 responses. The survey asked which library they would use if Sanderstead Library were to be closed. 43% said that they would not be able to use another library service if Sanderstead Library closed. 40% said that they would use Selsdon Library, 12% would use Purley Library and 11% would use Central Library. 2% said they would use Croydon's library online. The postcode locations of the 43% who reported that they would not be able to use another library service are shown below.

Figure C4.27: respondents who cannot use another library and frequency of use¹



¹ 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.

● Frequently

● Regularly

● Occasionally

Their reasons will vary. It is indeed more difficult to park near to Purley Library as there is little on-street parking in the immediate vicinity and the paid-for Council car park is some distance away, as is Tesco's car park (which is free for its customers). There is some short-term car parking on street near Selsdon Library, but of more practical use is the free car park in the basement of Sainsbury's which has an escalator and lifts which can be used to reach the library. Stays at the car park are for Sainsbury's customers and limited to two hours, so it is not suitable for longer stays at the library.

There is free on-street parking on neighbouring side roads although some are congested and spaces can be in short supply given the number of driveways. As a result, a short walk will be needed from the car to the library and this will not be suitable for people with mobility difficulties.

There are various bus routes from the wider Sanderstead Library catchment area to Selsdon Library but these can require a short walk to the bus stop and journeys from some parts of the area would involve a change of bus. For many this 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 although this will not be so much of an issue in a less deprived area like Sanderstead.

Although central Croydon is well-served by public transport, access is not straightforward from parts of Sanderstead and, like in Purley, parking will incur a cost and will be challenging for some to use.

For those living in the vicinity of Sanderstead Library, reaching other libraries involves steep gradients, fewer easy bus routes and/or fewer free parking opportunities. **So for those who cannot easily travel to an alternative library, the Council is proposing that a new accessible bus transport service would be provided.** It would take Sanderstead library users with access needs from the Sanderstead Library building to activities at an alternative library. Selsdon or Purley Libraries would host existing regular activities such as Rhymetimes, the reading group, knitting groups and the bus transport would ensure local Sanderstead residents who cannot otherwise travel can continue these activities, albeit in a different library building.

Opponents of the proposed closure of the library argued that it is well-used, pointing out that the level of issues was the fourth highest in the network and that its unit costs are relatively low (they are fifth lowest at £6). This raised for them the question why Sanderstead Library was being singled out.

Arguments also included criticism of the condition of the library and the standard of the interior and furniture and the lack of an accessible toilet – the library had not been invested in and it had been 'set up to fail'. It was also argued that, given the level of council tax paid, the residents should be entitled to the service.

For its size, it is indeed comparatively well used judged by the number of visits and issues. It ranks eighth for the number of visits but, of the five libraries with fewer visits, four are

open for just two days a week. The exception is New Addington Library which, like Sanderstead Library, is open for three days. For other uses, event attendances and PC hours used at Sanderstead Library are near bottom (11th and 12th respectively).

It is recognised that the library has a group of active users who make good use of the books and other materials available from the library. However, these active users represent just 5.4% 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 Sanderstead Library as, for example, New Addington's (also open 3 days a week) proportion of active users in its population is lower at 4.3%.

It was suggested that Sanderstead Library was being unfairly singled out, in comparison with, say, Purley Library. There are libraries which are being recommended for retention which on some important measures perform worse than Sanderstead Library. These include:

- x. **New Addington, which has lower level of visits, active users and issues, but much higher levels of event attendance and PC usage.** As pointed out earlier in this report, New Addington serves a catchment area with high levels of deprivation and is some distance from alternative libraries.
- xi. Purley, which has slightly lower numbers of visits and issues, but has more active users, PC hours in use and event attendances, *despite only being open for two days a week*. Before COVID and the reduction in weekly opening hours from 34.5 to 24 for Sanderstead and 44.5 to 16 hours for Purley, Purley's issues were higher than Sanderstead's in 2018-19 and slightly lower in 2019-20 and the number of visits was much higher in both years. In 2019-20 the visits per hour were higher at Purley and the same was also true in 2023-24. Also, as argued in the review of Purley Library earlier in this report, a town centre location is more effective, especially if the library were moved.

In contrast, Selsdon Library, with the same staffed opening hours as Sanderstead, performs far better on every service indicator. Its budget is double that of Sanderstead's, but the cost per visit at £4 is second lowest only higher than the Central Library's. Visits are over treble that of Sanderstead's, issues more than double, PC usage over four times higher and event attendance three times higher.

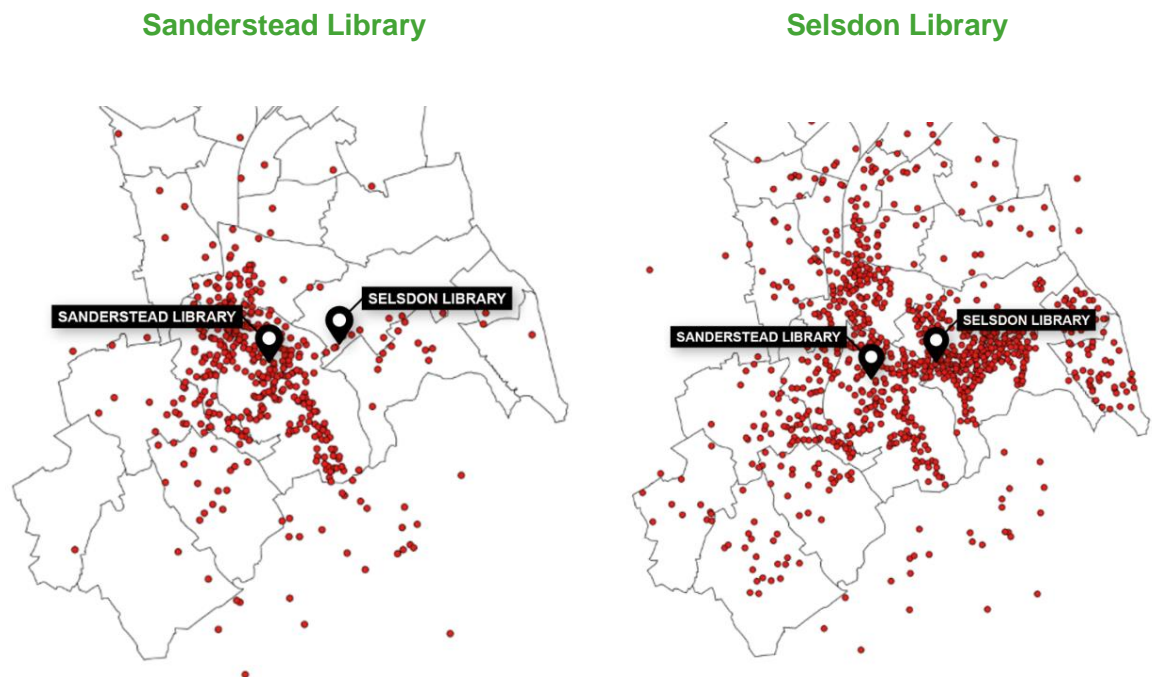
Assessed against our four overall criteria, Sanderstead Library's overall performance is fair (thanks to the number of issues), but the building is small and not suited to the full range of library services and the catchment area has a small population and a low level of need.

The library's location has some advantages (eg ease of parking) but it is remote from areas of high footfall and, more significantly is only 1.3 miles from the highly successful Selsdon Library with which it shares a sizeable portion of its catchment area.

The maps below show the dispersal of the addresses of the active users registered at each of the two libraries. Sanderstead's are concentrated around a corridor from Sanderstead Hill southwards; Selsdon's has a concentration around the library but is more widely spread and also has users in the same corridor as Sanderstead and further west.

Given the comparatively low level of population in both catchment areas (a lot of it shared), having two libraries in such close proximity in an area of low comparative need is not efficient.

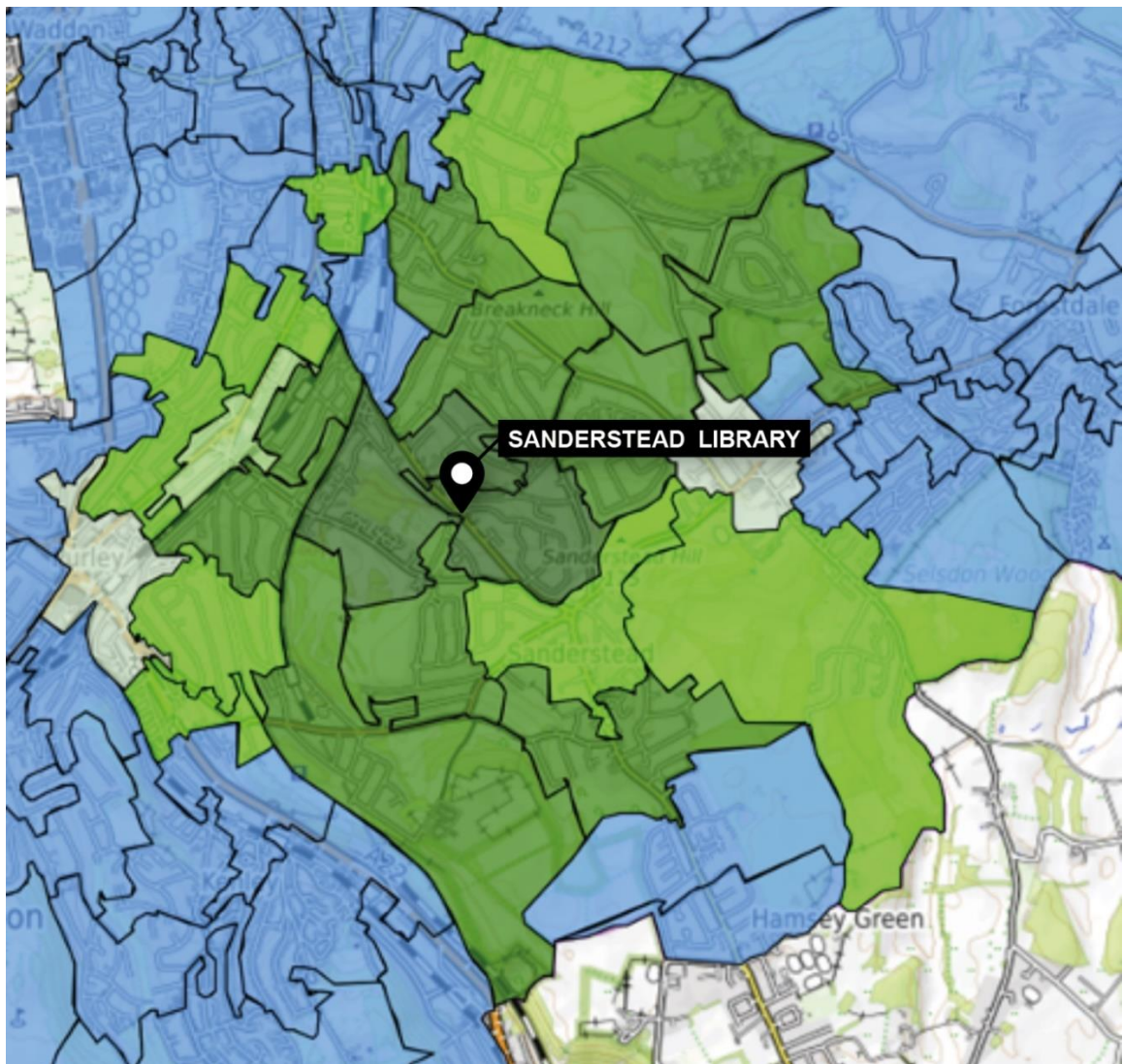
Figure C4.28: addresses of active users of Sanderstead and Selsdon libraries



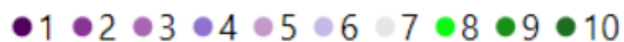
It was also argued by consultation participants that there was need in the area. The IMD statistics suggest otherwise as the catchment area has some of the least deprived LSOAs England for the overall IMD measure of deprivation (see figure C4.26 below).

The consultation feedback highlighted the potential impact of closure on health and well-being and on learning and education. 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 little deprivation. As illustrated below, of the 23 LSOAs in the catchment area, over half (12) were in the two least deprived deciles. There is a similar pattern with indicators such as Education, Skills and Training where 9 of the 23 LSOAs are in the least deprived decile in England.

Figure C4.29: 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)



The consultation highlighted that closure of their much-loved library would have an impact on the health and wellbeing of many of its regular users, including older people. As argued in the consultation feedback, libraries help to reduce loneliness and offer a 'safe space' for people to explore books, learning and access information. They are often described as a lifeline for many people and closure would represent a 'loss'.

This is recognised in the EQIA (see Appendix D) which has recommended other mitigations focusing on outreach. This would involve moving existing hosted and library-run activities at Sanderstead Library to nearby local venues that have been suggested through the consultation 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 Sanderstead Library's current users to continue in new locations. The increase in opening hours at Purley and Selsdon libraries would also enable users of Sanderstead Library to benefit from the more extensive offer in those libraries and enjoy new experiences.

The impact of the closure on children and young people was highlighted in feedback given the library's importance for furthering children's literacy and enjoyment of reading materials beyond the school curriculum. 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, 45% 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.

In Purley, local residents have urged the Council to increase opening hours including Saturdays, because working people and their families cannot access their local library. At Selsdon, residents have asked for more staff days to provide more activities and access for young people aged under 16 who cannot use Open+. The extension of opening hours at these two larger libraries would have the potential to improve overall take-up of the library service in the wider area.

Young people in the Sanderstead Library catchment area will be able to make use of their travel passes to use buses to reach Selsdon Library (and, for some, other libraries) 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, more comfortable venue. 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 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 Sanderstead as a valued local asset for the local community was highlighted in consultation. It was argued that it is the only public building in Sanderstead and is the only community space that is not faith-based. It was also suggested that the saving from closure would be low in proportion to the impact caused.

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.

Closures will be a blow for the users that want to retain them. However, 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.

Sanderstead Library is well-supported by Friends of Sanderstead Library and Sanderstead Residents Association and during consultation feedback they suggested that there may be groups interested in the library building, although there were reservations about the sustainability and viability of any alternative community operation of the site without financial support from the Council. The library service is proposing that the vacant building is 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.

Findings and recommendations

Given its small size, its location and the relatively low level of need and the fact that many residents are in the wider catchment areas of Selsdon and other libraries, it is recommended that Sanderstead Library is considered for closure:

- xii. Despite the relatively high level of issues of books and materials key aspects of service performance are poor.
- xiii. The population in the catchment area is among the least deprived in England.
- xiv. The library is a small building in a location that does not benefit from busy footfall.
- xv. Much of the catchment area for the library is within the 1-mile catchment area for Selsdon library and within a 1.25-mile catchment area for both Purley and Selsdon libraries.

- xvi. A successful alternative library (Selsdon) is within reach for many and accessible transport would be provided to support those that would otherwise find it hard to visit Selsdon and Purley libraries.
- xvii. The freeing up of resources would enable the service to provide outreach support and collections in community venues and reach those not currently using the service, including children, young people and older residents.
- xviii. The library is well-supported by the local community and there may be the potential for keeping the building in use as a community asset.

Recommendations

- 2. That Sanderstead Library is closed to allow for the reinvestment of resources in neighbouring libraries and in library outreach.**
- 3. That the mitigations summarised above and in the EQIA be implemented.**
- 4. That the Council explores the level of community interest in retaining the building.**
- 5. That the particular impacts on people with mobility issues that might prevent them making use of another library are considered further.**
- 6. That the Council explores options for outreach provision to serve the community impacted by closure.**
- 7. That an accessible bus transport is provided to enable users with access needs to use services at other libraries.**

*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>*