

Future of Shropshire School Library Service Consultation

Report on Public Feedback

July 2024



1 Background and Methods

In Shropshire, the School Library Service (SLS) operates as a traded service, which schools can buy into, and around 65% of schools in Shropshire choose to do so. Schools that subscribe to the service can borrow books and artefacts relating to school topics and receive training for staff and pupil librarians. Schools can use the service to supplement their own stocks of books and resources.

The service has been operating at a loss for the last two financial years and the council no longer has the reserves to fund this. Any future service, if retained, would require more schools to subscribe to the service and to pay more to do so.

Shropshire, like many other councils, faces a very challenging financial position and must find £62m of savings this year. This is due to ever rising demand for social care, which now accounts for almost £4 in every £5 the council spends, and rising costs from continuing high levels of inflation.

This means there are some very difficult decisions to make, including reducing some services, particularly non-statutory ones. In some cases, this means stopping services altogether. As part of the council's savings plans, it proposes to stop the School Library Service from the autumn if no other solution can be found.

Schools from across Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and further afield were invited to respond to a consultation to share ideas, including whether they would be willing to pay more for the service, or start using the service if they don't already, to make it financially viable for the future. A separate survey was also available to the public, and it is this public feedback that is the subject of this report.

Quantitative survey data was analysed using MS Excel and results are presented visually where possible as Figures. Qualitative responses were read and analysed for themes. These themes are presented in Tables where appropriate and anonymised examples of comments representing common themes are provided.

This report focuses on the responses from members of the public who chose to participate in the consultation, and proceeds in six sections:

Section 1: Background and Methods (this current section) provides a brief overview of the consultation's aims and the methods of analysis employed in this report.

Section 2: Respondents offers a short overview of the characteristics of respondents answering the survey.

Section 3: School Subscription discusses the results from survey questions asking respondents for information on whether the schools they are interested in currently subscribe to the SLS, and what the impacts might be of schools' subscriptions ceasing or the service being discontinued.

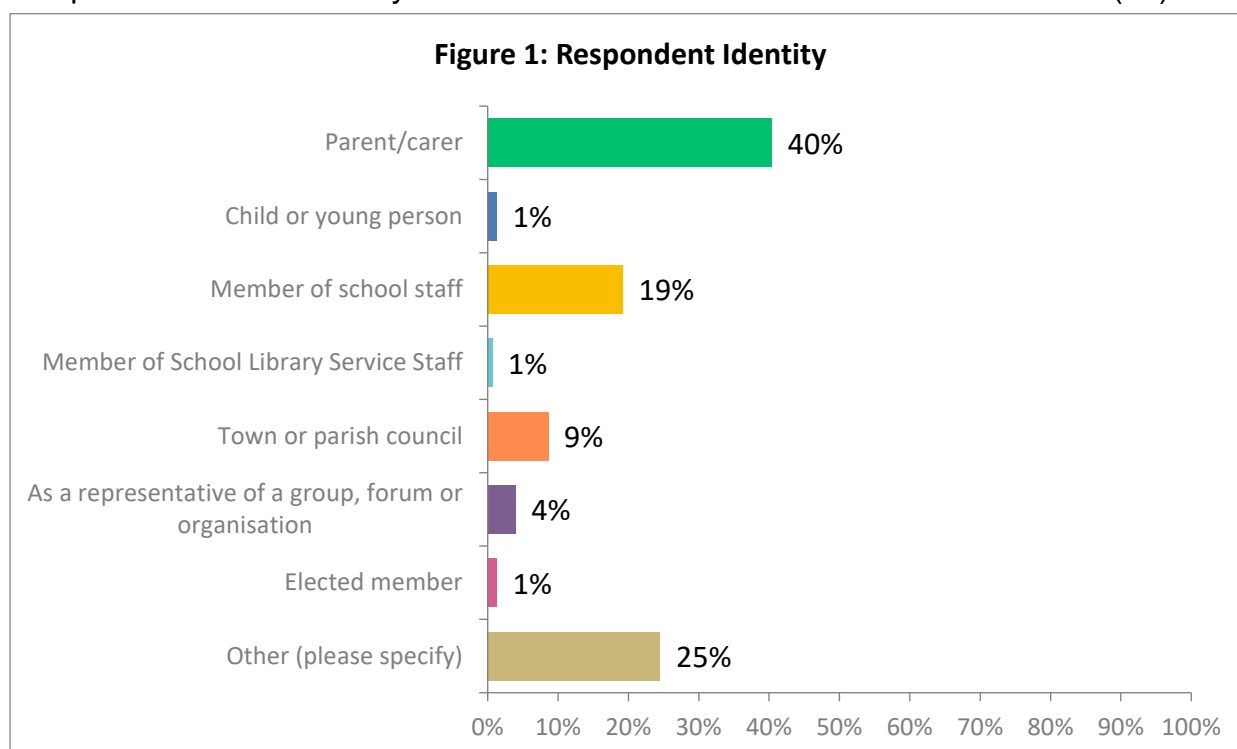
Section 4: Feedback on Proposals details the feedback from respondents about the proposals for achieving savings to make the SLS financially viable, as well as the possible impacts of the proposals.

Section 5: Additional Feedback provides an overview of respondents' suggestions for alternatives to the proposals, as well as other feedback offered in the survey and in email correspondence from the public.

Section 6: Summary and Conclusion briefly summarises the key findings of the report and offers suggestions for moving forward.

2 Respondents

Overall, there were 151 responses to the public survey. Respondents were asked to identify themselves and their connection to the school and/or School Library Service (see **Figure 1**). A large portion of respondents were answering as parent carers (61), though two respondents identified themselves as children or young people. Many respondents also said they are connected with schools as a member of staff (29).



There was a strong community interest in the consultation, with 13 respondents answering the survey as town or parish councils, six respondents answering on behalf of a group, forum or organisation, two elected members responded, and two local parish councils also sent emails directly to the TellUs inbox expressing their views on the consultation. Additionally, a quarter of respondents identified in “other” ways, and 14 of these said that they are “members of the public” or similar.

23 of the “other” respondents also identified as more directly connected with schools in positions such as school governors, retired teachers, parents of former pupils, grandparents of pupils, or volunteers with schools.

When asked to identify the school or schools with which they were most concerned, **over 70 distinct schools were named**, spanning the breadth of Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin.

Mapping respondents' approximate locating using the first half of their postcodes also demonstrates that respondents from across the county expressed their views on the proposals, though the largest number of respondents are located in the Shrewsbury area (see Image 1).¹ It is particularly significant, however, that the consultation does also include respondents from more remote areas as well.

Respondents identifying as parent carers (or those respondents who identify as children or young people) were also asked to identify the age groups of their children affected by the proposals. These responses are displayed in Figure 2.

Only 60 parent carers responded to this question, but some of these respondents were answering on behalf of households with multiple children. What Figure 2 is able to demonstrate is that the majority (75%) of the children that parent carers identified as being affected by the proposals are of primary school age or younger.

A majority of respondents also identified as female and of White ethnic background.

Image 1 Map of Respondent Approximate Location

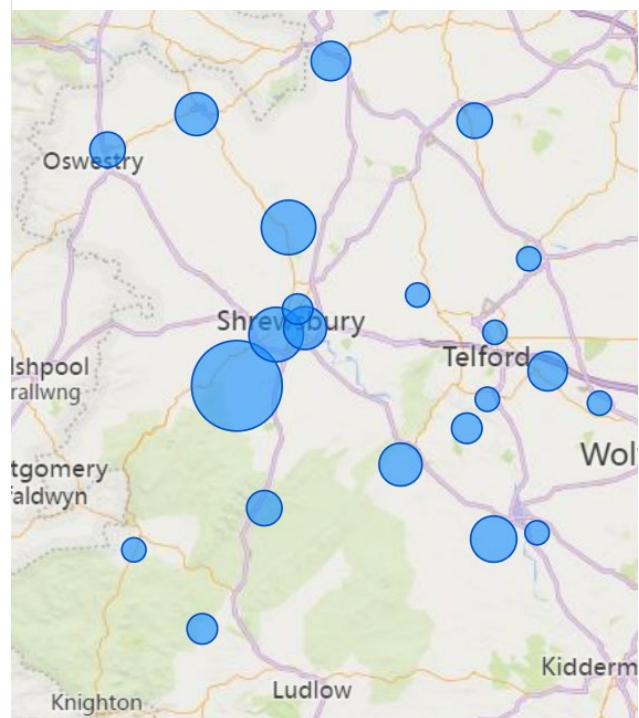
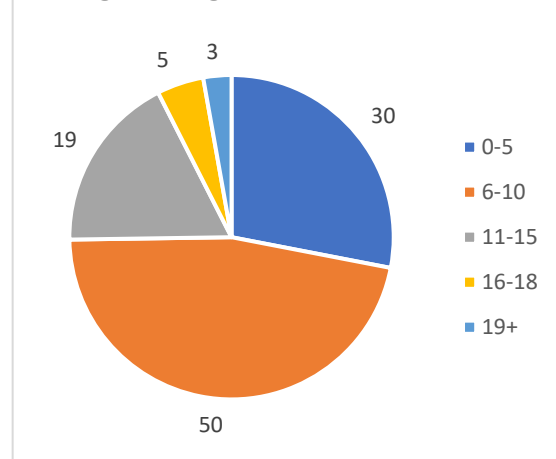


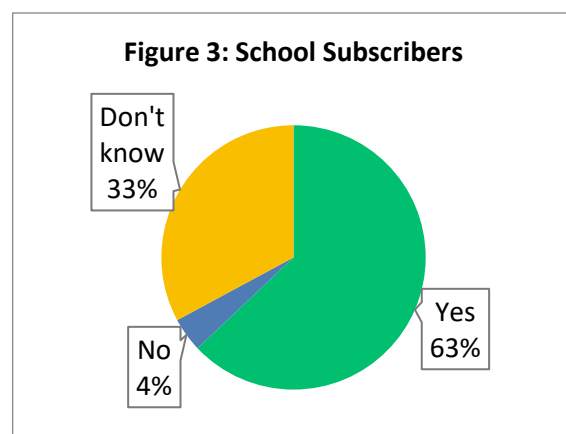
Figure 2: Ages of Children Affected



3 School Subscriptions

A majority of respondents (63%) said that the school they are concerned about currently subscribes to the SLS (see Figure 3). A third of respondents, however, said that they don't know whether their school subscribes.

Figure 3: School Subscribers



¹ The largest circle depicted, with 29 respondents, is SY5.

Seven respondents said that their school does not currently subscribe to the service. These respondents were asked whether they would encourage their school to subscribe to the SLS, and the majority (four) said that they would.

Respondents who said that their school does subscribe to the service were asked what they think the impact would be if the service no longer continues, or if their school is no longer able to subscribe. 78 individuals offered comments in response to this question, and their comments were tagged for the presence of themes. Some comments contained multiple themes. These themes are organised by the frequency with which they appeared and are displayed in **Table 1**. Examples of these themes are provided below.

Table 1. Themes – Impacts of Service Not Continuing	Count	%
Learning /student engagement will suffer if SLS lost	37	35%
Access to quality/quantity of resources would disappear or diminish	24	23%
School budgets cannot replace the service	19	18%
SLS is valuable/essential (generally)	11	10%
Learning impacted positively by SLS currently	7	7%
Will especially affect rural communities	4	4%
Will especially affect poorer students (e.g. no books at home)	2	2%
Schools too small to house resources	1	1%

The biggest theme identified by 35% of respondents was that **student learning and/or engagement would suffer** if the SLS was no longer accessible by schools. For example:

- “The service provides a wide variety of resources for topics that schools and therefore children would be unable to access without this service, which would detrimentally impact their education and significantly reduce the breadth of their knowledge.”
- “This will have major implications for children who need this for their education. Every school and child should have the opportunity and access to this much needed service.”

23% of respondents said that the **quality or quantity of resources available to schools would diminish** as a result of the service no longer continuing or being inaccessible. For example:

- “Reduction in availability of resources which the school would be unable to provide itself or access elsewhere in this way. This would result in a lowering in the quality of educational provision.”
- “It will be devastating to all schools who subscribe. It is genuinely a wonderful resource for teachers and children. The teachers will be spending more of their own money to get the resources they need to teach an enriched lesson/topic.”

Relatedly, 18% of respondents made the point that **school budgets would not be able to adequately replace the service**. One respondent also said that **schools are too small** to house the kinds of resources the SLS provides. For example:

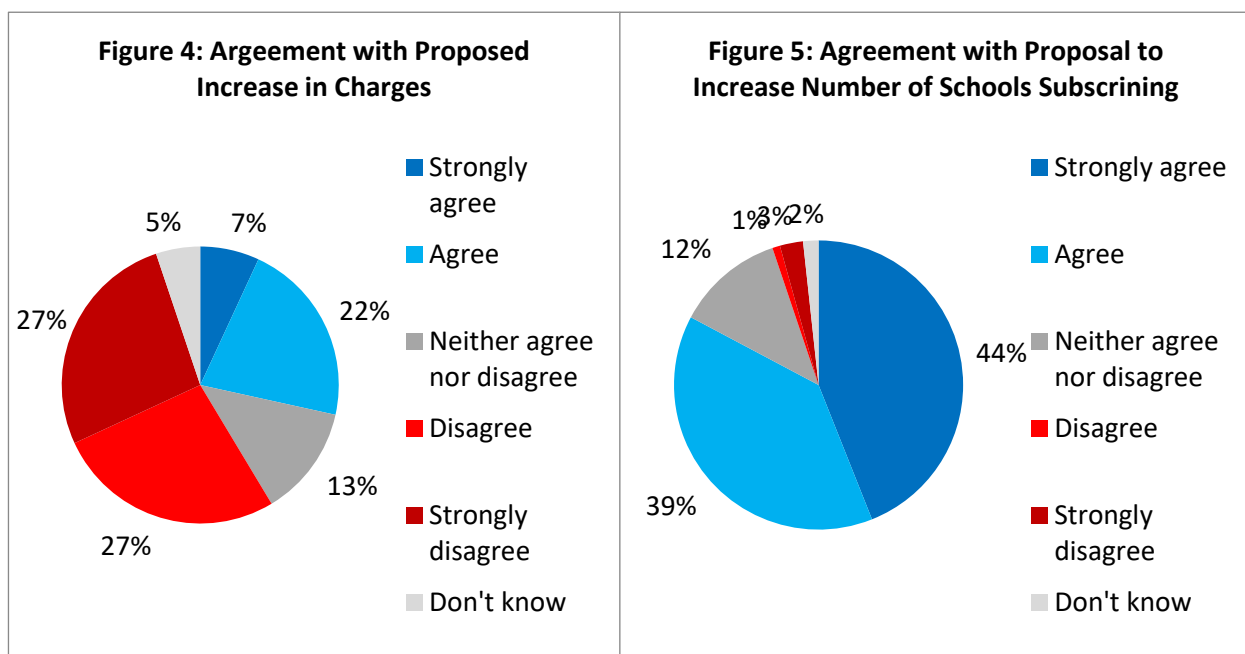
- “We would lose the majority of our stock from the library, and it would take years to replace it through purchasing it directly. In particular, non-fiction stock is too expensive to buy in when the topic ranges are so wide, so we would probably lose almost all of the non-fiction area of the library.”

10% of respondents made the general point that the **SLS is a valued service**, and 7% said that the **SLS impacts learning in a positive way**.

Finally, six respondents were concerned about the disproportionate impacts that losing access to the SLS would have on rural or poorer communities. Four respondents said that they were concerned that losing the SLS would particularly **impact rural communities**, and two were concerned about the **impacts on poorer students**.

4 Feedback on Proposals

Respondents were next asked to give their feedback on the proposals themselves. When asked whether they generally agree or disagree with the proposal to increase the charges to schools for the SLS going forward (indicating that the increase is estimated to be around 40%). A majority of respondents (54%) indicated that they disagree with this aspect of the proposal (see Figure 4).



There was much more agreement around the proposal to increase the number of schools subscribing to the service. 83% agreed with this aspect of the proposals (see Figure 5).

Respondents were then asked to provide any other comments they wished to make on both aspects of the proposals. These comments were read and tagged for

common themes, and these themes are presented in **Tables 2 & 3** with examples below.

79 respondents provided comments about the proposal to increase the subscription charges up by to 40%, which is the amount necessary for the service to become financially viable.

Table 2. Themes – Proposed Increase in Charges	Count	%
The increase of 40% is unaffordable for schools/too much	28	32%
Alternative suggestion to reduce costs / reduction in service level	19	22%
Recommend an increase lower than the 40%	10	11%
The library service is essential / must be maintained	9	10%
Need more information on the proposal	6	7%
Poor management/decisions by Shropshire Council (e.g. shopping centres)	5	6%
Agree with the charges being proposed / schools should pay for the service	5	6%
Shropshire Council should make reductions in other areas	2	2%
Other	3	3%

The largest theme present in these comments (touched upon by 32% of respondents) is that **an increase of 40% is unaffordable** for schools and/or too much. Comments included, for example:

- “While I understand that there may be a need to increase the charge to schools for the service, 40% is too high an increase. Putting the charge up by this much could have the opposite effect of that desired and result in schools being forced to withdraw from the scheme due to their own financial constraints.”
- “How can any school with spiralling costs such as energy and transport be expected to pay such a huge increase. This is a council run service and costs should not be pushed onto schools.”
- “Schools already operate at a loss due to funding cuts each year. They struggle to provide children with the resources and support they need to be able to help children to achieve the standards set by government.”

The second largest theme was particularly important, as several respondents brought up ways that **costs might be reduced without needing to increase service the service charge** by as much as 40%. Suggestions included several respondents saying that service levels might be reduced, as well as other alternative options. For example:

- “Maybe don’t deliver the books and ask schools to collect them, ask schools to come and choose their books too.”
- “Could costs be reduced by having local schools collect books, are there opportunities for books to be passed on to the next nearest school.”
- “Is it possible to reduce the service, e.g. shorter opening hours, slightly reduced stock but to keep the core service?”
- “The cost and losses of the SLS are a drop in the ocean compared to other council expenditures. Leave the SLS alone - the local authority has a legal duty to provide a decent education to children. Lowering the price will get

more schools to subscribe.”

- “With that said, I don’t fully disagree with the SLS needing sufficient resource to operate and perhaps the subscription costs could be tailored to better reflect usage and the volume of resources that it supplies to those schools of different sizes.”

A smaller percentage of respondents (11%) recommended a **smaller percentage increase in service charges**. Relatedly, 6% of respondents said that they **agreed with the increased charges** as proposed.

10% of respondents made the clear point in this space that the **service is essential and should be maintained**.

7% of respondents said that they wanted to hear **more information about the proposals**, and 6% made comments about **poor management within Shropshire Council** that has led to this financial situation. Relatedly, 2% of respondents said that **Shropshire Council should make reductions in other areas** in order to maintain the service.

A smaller number of respondents (50) provided further comments on the aspect of the proposal that suggests the council increase the number of schools subscribing to the SLS. These comments were also read and tagged for theme, and the most common themes are presented in **Table 3**, with examples below.

Table 3. Themes – Proposal to Increase Subscribers	Count	%
Service should be available to all schools/don’t remove the service	20	34%
Need more information on the proposal	7	12%
Simplify processes / make it more streamlined / improved systems	6	10%
Positive comments about increased subscriptions	6	10%
General negative comments about Shropshire Council/management	6	10%
Need better marketing of the service to encourage more schools	5	9%
Negative comments about increased subscriptions	5	9%
Other	3	5%

The largest theme among respondents to this question (with 34% of respondents touching upon it) was that the **service should continue, and that it should be available to all schools**. Examples of this theme include:

- “You should look at going as far and wide as you can to supply the service. Use it as an income stream.”
- “This is a no-brainer. Lower the price and get more subscribers. Apply logic.”
- “It would be good for as many school as possible to access this service.”
- “All schools should be accessing this invaluable service.”

12% of respondents said that **more information is needed on the proposal**. This, as well as the presence of this theme in **Table 2**, indicates that communication around the service itself and any future changes needs to improve. Comments included, for example:

- “I would be interested to know which schools don’t use the service and why? Surely that data should be available to the public.”

- “I would want to see costed information sent to headteachers. Eg the current cost is £x per pupil per year, if Y schools contribute that could be reduced to £x-y and so on.”

Relatedly, around 9% of respondents said that **better marketing of the service was required in order to improve the number of subscribers** going forward. For example:

- “You should subsidise the service whilst you attempt to make it more profitable or pay its way. Why did the council not notice this problem before and act? Who is in charge of marketing this service or getting sponsorship for it?”
- “Push the service more and what it can provide. Ask for specific members of staff who you know use the service to get others, who don't, to subscribe. Find out the reading coordinators within schools.”

10% of respondents commenting on this question had generally **negative things to say about Shropshire Council management** (similar to the theme in **Table 2**), and 9% generally **negative things to say about increasing subscriptions**. 10% had generally **positive comments about the idea of increasing subscriptions**.

Finally, 10% of respondents also suggested **streamlining services and systems** within the SLS to make it more cost efficient, and many of these comments were similar to or repeated comments from the previous open-ended question, similar to themes in **Table 2**.

A third open-ended question in this section of the survey asked respondents to comment on what they thought the impacts of the proposals will be (whether negative or positive). 65 respondents answered this question, and a total of seven common themes were detected. These are presented in **Table 4**, with examples of comments given below.

Table 4. Themes – Impacts of Proposals	Count	%
Will have a general negative impact	21	30%
Negative impact on children and their opportunity to access books	15	21%
Negative impact / reduced use due to proposed increase in cost	13	19%
Negative impact on smaller/rural schools who rely on the SLS	7	10%
Positive impact from increasing the number of schools using the service	5	7%
Important to retain the service	5	7%
Negative impact on children from deprived backgrounds	2	3%

30% of respondents feel that these proposals will have a **generally negative impact**. For example:

- “There is absolutely nothing positive to say about this. The negative impact on schools and children will be far-reaching into the future.”

More specific negative impacts were also identified by respondents. For example, 21% of respondents said that the proposals would have a **negative impact on children and their opportunity to access books**. For example:

- “Children won't have access to book, won't read and will therefore cost the council more money in the future.”
- “Children’s exposure to quality text would reduce without the SLS.”

19% of respondents said that the **proposed increase in cost would negatively impact the number of subscribers**. For example:

- “If the costs increase, less schools will use the service.”

10% of respondents made the point that the proposals would particularly have a **negative impact on smaller and more rural schools**, and 3% said that the proposals would **negatively impact children from more deprived backgrounds**. For example:

- “There are NO positive impacts. There are MANY negative impacts - particularly making available to schools and our young people a wide range of books that otherwise they could not access. This will impact smaller rural primaries more than any others.”
- “Very negative, particularly for children from disadvantaged groups and those without English as a first language who will not have the same access to books and information at home.”

7% of respondents thought that the proposals will have a **positive impact by increasing the number of schools subscribing** to the service. For example:

- “The proposal to increase the number of schools should be positive if managed correctly and costs/budgets revised.”

Finally 7% of respondents had **generally positive things to say about the service**. For example:

- “The library is an amazing resource. The staff are so knowledgeable and the resources are fantastic.”

5 Additional Feedback

Open-Ended Survey Questions

Two additionally open-ended questions were asked of respondents to the public survey, which were not specifically about the proposals, but soliciting additional feedback and ideas that might help to inform the consultation.

The first question asked respondents whether they had any alternative suggestions to the proposals, particularly ideas for alternative places to accommodate the service. 54 respondents provided comments on this, and the main themes identified in these responses are displayed in **Table 5**, with examples below.

Table 5. Themes – Alternative Suggestions	Count	%
SLS to be located at locations other than Shirehall	19	26%
Poor management/decisions by Shropshire Council (e.g. shopping centres)	14	19%
Alternative charging policy (e.g. charge out of county schools more)	8	11%
Support from voluntary/other public sector/business	8	11%

Remove the collection service / schools to pick up their orders	7	10%
Provide an excellent service with relevant / exciting books etc	6	8%
Need further information / transparency	4	6%
Reduction in opening hours / days	3	4%
Other	3	4%

Some of the themes that emerge in **Table 5** are similar to those that appear elsewhere in the survey, such as **a need for more transparency** about the future of the service (6%), as well as **concerns about poor management at Shropshire council** (19%).

However, other themes present in responses to this question are fairly unique and provide some helpful further insights. The largest theme in this question (present in 26% of responses) was the **suggestion that the SLS be housed outside of Shirehall**. Examples include:

- “Travelling library van.”
- “A location outside of town centre might work as costs would be cheaper.”
- “Utilise schools’ spare space. Maintain database of items and their locations.”
- “The music service is based out of Oak Meadow School and whilst it is totally separate it makes sense to accommodate the service near a school) - Meole Brace Primary turned the prefab sure start building into a library after the council moved out and the children use that space every week. What if different schools took on responsibility for different sections of the library — 1 school takes on Roman History, another Greek History, another RE etc and then when a school is looking to borrow they collect from the resource hub for that subject?”
- “If SLS can be given alternative accommodation will this ensure a future for the service? Guildhall (once vacated by the University), Rowley’s house, SLS library hubs in our town libraries, a designated building in the new Riverside development.”

11% of respondents offered **alternative suggestions around charging** for the SLS. For example:

- “Consider charging out-of-county schools a higher fee, if not already done. Could the Shropshire service be combined with that of a neighbouring county to share costs?”
- “Cut down the frequency of visits; e.g. if it is currently every half term make it once every term. Ask schools to ask parents to contribute. Increase Council tax. I know a referendum would be needed but putting it forward specifically to keep this service (and other non statutory but highly desirable services such as waste collection sites and pothole repair) means I would vote for it.”
- “Why not offer the service to the general public, particularly in rural areas where access to main libraries is limited...What about providing a service to residential care homes where access to books may be limited.”

11% of respondents also had some novel suggestions around bringing in third parties, such as the **voluntary sector, public sector, or businesses** to help find solutions. For example:

- “Are there any charitable foundations that could support the service?”

- “If you publish the true costs of services then perhaps industry could be approached to sponsor this service, within Shropshire we have companies and organisations that sponsor and provide finance for STEM related subjects in schools, e.g. South Shropshire Engineering Ambassadors are sponsored to run school projects by industry, an exemplar.”
- “Parish Councils and charitable organisation could contribute to the cost.”

10% of respondents suggested **removing the collection service** and having schools collect their own orders (a theme echoed frequently among schools themselves as a possible savings option). Another 4% of respondents suggested **reducing opening hours** as another possible way to achieve savings.

Finally, 8% of respondents (6) suggested that **ensuring that the service is excellent and/or ensuring schools are incentivised to subscribe** was the best way to achieve more subscriptions, and thus financial viability. For example:

- “Should it not be the council to help with premises? Schools need an incentive to sign up.”
- “Increase the take-up of services by ensuring you provide the best possible service and not pricing yourself out of schools capacity to pay.”

In the final question of the survey, respondents were asked to say anything else they would like to about the SLS proposals. 38 respondents took this opportunity to make some final comments, most re-emphasising points they had made elsewhere. These comments were grouped thematically and the themes are displayed in **Table 6**.

Table 6. Themes – Any Other Comments	Count	%
Children need the service / impact on their education	12	28%
Do not close the School Library Service	9	21%
The SLS is a highly valued service / should remain unchanged	8	19%
Poor management/decisions by Shropshire Council (e.g. shopping centres)	4	9%
Consider other areas for saving money	4	9%
Important service for schools/rural schools	3	7%
Need further information/transparency	2	5%
Other	1	2%

The largest themes emerging from the responses to this question demonstrate that, overall, respondents wanted to emphasise the importance of the service and to plea for it to remain open.

28% made the points that **the service has an important impact on children and their education**, and 21% urged the council **not to close the SLS**. A further 19% said that **the SLS is highly valued**. 7% made the point that it was specifically an important service for **rural schools**.

Other respondents used this space to made critical comments about the council. For example, 9% **criticised the council for poor management**, 9% said that the council should **consider other areas for saving money**, and 5% made the point

that **further information/transparency was needed** about future plans for the service.

Email Feedback

In addition to the survey responses, eight individuals wrote to Shropshire Council via email using the TellUs inbox, which is set up specifically to collect further feedback on open consultations. Of these eight responses, two were written on behalf of parish councils. One individual wrote to agree with the proposals, while the other seven wrote to object to them.

The individual in favour of the proposals suggested that this is one area where the council could make savings in order to continue statutory services. An excerpt from the email illustrates this:

- “This service should not be subsidised as it is not a core service. The council needs to concentrate its finances on the core services it has to legally provide.”

Individuals in opposition to the proposals reiterated many of the themes raised by survey respondents also opposed to the proposals. For example:

- “Our school...see this as an essential service that has become very much more important in these days where children have modern technology and need the introduction to reading books that the school library service.”
- “Schools in Shropshire buy into the SLS as a way of getting up to date books about topics, and new fiction books. If these cuts happen, children won't have access to new fiction books or up to date and appealing topic books. SLS also provide ‘Artefact Boxes’ which are amazing tools for schools to use to enhance children’s understanding and engagement. A rich collection of books and artefacts, worth tens of thousands of pounds, have been built up over generations. If this collection is closed, Shropshire Council will not have the investment available to recreate it the future.”
- “It is most concerning that this service is being considered for closure on the basis costs are not covered by payments received. To be treating it as a stand alone "business" is completely wrong. Although only 65% of schools subscribe (are the rest really not interested or can't they afford it?) the high value of what is offered is not being considered. For schools to each provide their own equivalent resource would amount to a massive total cost and be ridiculous when an existing good centralised service meets the need. This service benefits many thousands of children, no doubt enhancing their education plus simply their experience of school, and to be not accepting that it is a service that must receive a relatively small amount of funding to make up the shortfall in income amounts to neglect of this generation of youngsters. I appreciate the financial state the Council faces because of Central Government policy but would suggest that the service is so beneficial that it should be retained.
- “[Our parish council] strongly objects to cuts to this service which is particularly vital to smaller schools who do not otherwise have these resources.”

One of the letters, of considerable length and thoughtfulness, offers some alternative suggestions from a former teacher and frequent user of the service. This respondent

suggests that the SLS:

- “Maintain a schools’ librarian to inform branch libraries:
 - to purchase appropriate texts for young people
 - to inform parents on appropriately matched texts which are colour coded using same criteria as schools
 - to consult with schools on offering GROUP READS through BRANCH LIBRARIES
 - to work with promoters of BOOK FESTIVALS to promote BOOK WEEKS, etc
- Increase the role of SLS to incorporate care home/apartment complexes for mature people:
 - promote the handling collections and books for Dementia with trainers such as Shropshire Partners In Care
 - I visit retirement complexes devoid of books
 - I visit retirement homes where residents tell me they are bored”

6 Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the public response to this consultation on the proposed changes to the SLS highlights the service’s importance to schools and communities. There was a strong community response to the consultation, with over 70 distinct schools represented, and responses from 13 town and parish councils to the survey and two direct letters from parish councils.

Overwhelmingly, respondents emphasised the importance of the service to schools and children, as well as urging the council to reconsider the proposed changes and/or closure of the service.

A majority of respondents (83%) agreed that increasing the number of schools subscribing was a good proposal for improving the service’s financial viability. However, a majority of respondents (54%) disagreed that subscription costs should rise by 40%, citing tight school budgets as the primary reason that schools were unlikely to be able to sustain subscriptions at that rate of increase.

Several alternative suggestions for improving the service’s financial viability were offered by respondents to the proposals. These included:

- SLS to be located at locations other than Shirehall.
- Alternative charging policies (e.g. charge out of county schools more).
- Support from voluntary/other public sector/business.
- Remove the collection service / schools to pick up their orders.
- Reduction in opening hours / days.

In conclusion, alternative options beyond raising subscription rates by 40% should be carefully considered, as there is strong community interest in maintaining the service, or at least some of the most crucial aspects, of the service.

Very many thanks are extended to the 151 individuals, groups, town and parish councils and others who took the time to respond to the public survey. Thanks also to those eight individuals and parish councils taking the time to write emails in support or opposition to the proposals. This feedback will influence the work of the SLS team as they consider how best to move the service forward toward a more financially viable model in the future.

July 2024

Analysis and reporting by:
Feedback and Insight Team, Communications and Engagement, Resources
Shropshire Council
Email: TellUs@shropshire.gov.uk

Shropshire Council Lead Department: Schools Library Service



Shropshire
Council