

Future of Shropshire School Library Service Consultation

Report on Feedback from Schools

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 this feedback has been collated into a separate report, which is also publicly available.

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 schools to 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: Current Subscription discusses the results of questions aimed at understanding which respondents subscribe to the service currently, their reasons for subscribing, and how the service might improve. This section also looks at non-subscribers, their reasons for not currently buying into the service, and what might make them likely to do so.

Section 4: Future Subscription and Increased Costs looks at the possible introduction of increases to the subscription charges and how much schools might be able to pay to keep the service viable.

Section 5: Impacts of Closure and Alternative Suggestions explores in detail the impacts that respondents say closure of the service or increased costs would have on them, as well as alternative suggestions for achieving savings that might make the service viable in the future.

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

2 Respondents

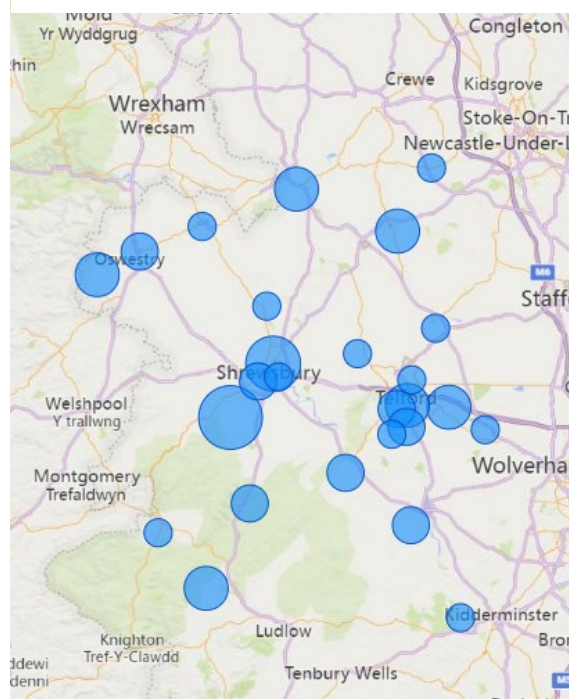
57 schools responded to the survey designed specifically to garner their unique perspective and gather as much feedback from them as possible about the current use of the SLS, the possible impacts of its closure, and ideas and alternative suggestions they might offer to help the Council consider whether closure if necessary or whether other options for offering the service might be possible going forward.

The survey asked respondents to identify both their individual school (encouraging just one response per school to this particular survey) as well as their role and contact information. This identifying information was requested so that the officers from the service area might contact schools directly about their subscriptions, needs and suggestions going forward. Because this report is publicly available, these identifying details are not presented here. However, some anonymised, broader information on those responding to the survey is important to consider.

Most of those individuals responding were headteachers, though a few teachers, administrators, or business managers had also been designated to fill in the survey on behalf of the school.

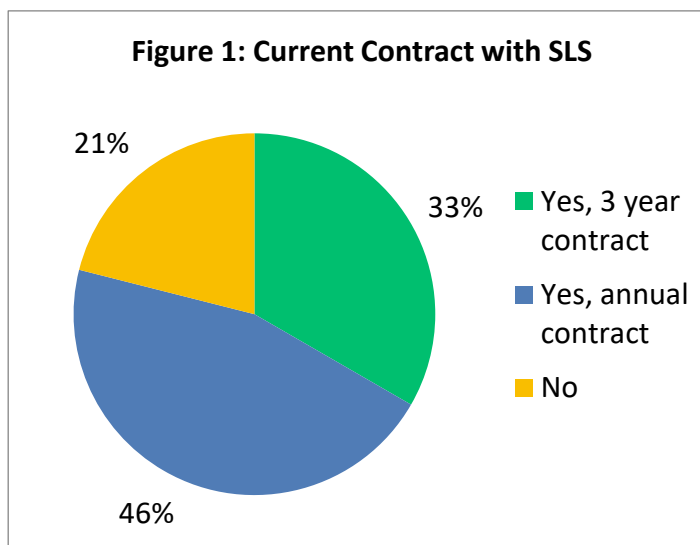
While schools from as far afield as Staffordshire, Worcestershire, and Wales can subscribe to the service and were invited to participate, only schools from Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin completed the survey. **Image 1** shows a map of the approximate location of the schools responding to the survey.

Image 1: Map of Approximate School Location



3 Current Subscription

The majority (79%) of schools responding to the survey are currently under contract with the service (see Figure 1). A third of schools responding subscribe to a three-year contract, while 46% are on an annual contract. 21% of schools (12) do not currently have a contract.



Feedback from Current Subscribers

Table 1 displays a list of services offered as part of the SLS subscription, which schools were asked to rank from 1-11, with 1 being their top reason for subscribing, and 11 being the service that is the least important reason they subscribe.

Schools currently subscribing overwhelmingly chose **topic loans** as their number one choice. **Artefact loans** and **reading set loans** followed closely behind as some of the most popular features of the subscription. Indeed, other comments offered in the survey (as will be detailed later) suggest that these are services that schools find invaluable to their teaching and the learning that their students experience.

Table 1. Ranking of Reasons Schools Currently Subscribe to SLS	
Reasons for Subscribing	Average Ranking
Topic loans	1.12
Artefact loans	3.27
Reading set loans	3.94
Bulk loan of fiction for the school library to enhance choice	4.45
Door to door delivery and collection service	4.55
Professional advice and support	6.88
Access to cost-effective online e-resources	7.09
Promoting schools reading for pleasure strategy	7.18
Assessment of stock and advice on book purchase	8.91
Advice on library refurbishment, resources and policy development	9.06
Training of school library staff and pupil librarians	9.55

When asked whether there are any other reasons that schools subscribe to the service, 21 schools took the opportunity to provide more detailed comments. These comments broadly fit into four themes, which are displayed in Table 2. Examples illustrating the themes are included below.

Table 2. Themes – Other Reasons the School Subscribes to SLS	Count	%
Access to diverse and quality texts	11	42%
School cannot afford to provide similar services themselves	9	35%
Good advice and support	2	8%
All of the services used	1	4%

The SLS improves student/school access to diverse and high-quality resources. This was the most frequently mentioned theme in the comments, with 11 respondents touching on it. For example:

- “Gives our pupils more access to high quality texts and allows them to see just how fantastic libraries are.”

Nine respondents said that **schools cannot afford to provide similar services/resources themselves.** For example:

- “We cannot possibly have access to all the resources. Financially and space.”

Two respondents mentioned that the SLS provides helpful **advice and support.** For example:

- “Thank you for your quick responses and helpful advice when looking for suitable resources. It is good to know you are aware of what each age group needs and what is appropriate for each key stage.”

Many or **all of the services used are of similar value to schools** (ranking difficult):

- “It was hard to rank the reasons above because we use the SLS for so much. All of the above either every term or from time to time.”

Another open-ended question asked current SLS subscribers whether they had any ideas or suggestions for how the service could be improved (**see Table 3**). Five main themes were detected in the 19 total responses that were offered here. Some comments again contained more than one theme.

Table 3. Themes – How Can Services Improve	Count	%
Happy with service as is	13	65%
Specific suggestions	3	14%
More information/training on current SLS provisions	2	10%
Could collect books themselves	2	10%
Cost may be too high at present	1	5%

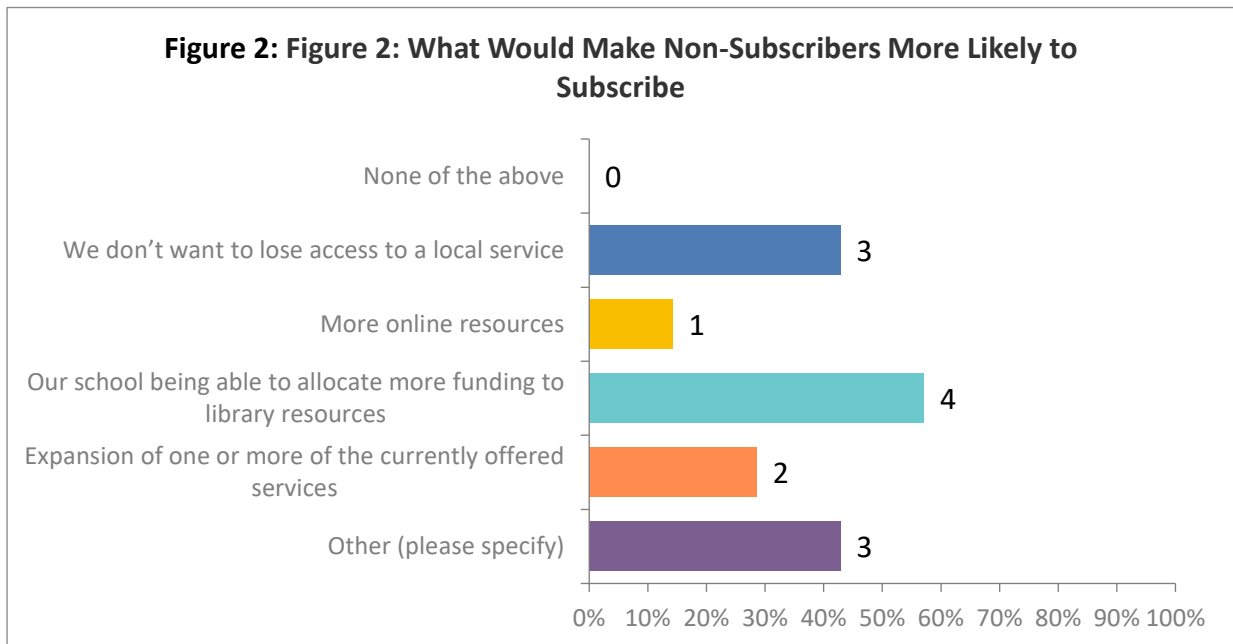
The majority of respondents left comments saying they were **happy with the current service as it is.** For example:

- “No it’s brilliant.”
- “We love it and would be gutted if it were to close.”

Three respondents offered **specific suggestions for improvement.** As these were so diverse, all three are included below:

- “To support schools with visiting authors and poets. To offer support with Reading Champions.”
- “Online access to the catalogue to enable selection and ordering of books through a portal would make ordering books easier.”

- “Long term yearly plan of books the school require - so that teachers do not have to spend time on requests during the busy term time.”



Two respondents suggested providing **more information and/or training on what is provided by the SLS**.

- “More info/a reminder on what you offer, as I wasn't aware of some of the things on the list above.”
- “A training session on the e-books service would be helpful to many schools, I think.”

Two other respondents said that they would be happy to **collect books themselves** if it would save on delivery costs, and one respondent said that they are considering whether to continue subscription to the SLS due to **costs** anyway.

Feedback from Current Non-Subscribers

12 schools responding to the survey indicated that they do not currently subscribe to the SLS. This group of respondents is particularly important for understanding how the service might gain more subscribers in the future, or whether improvements might be made to encourage more schools to subscribe.

The 12 respondents whose schools do not currently subscribe to the SLS were asked whether their school might be interested in subscribing in the future. Of the 12, seven said that they would, and five said that they would not.

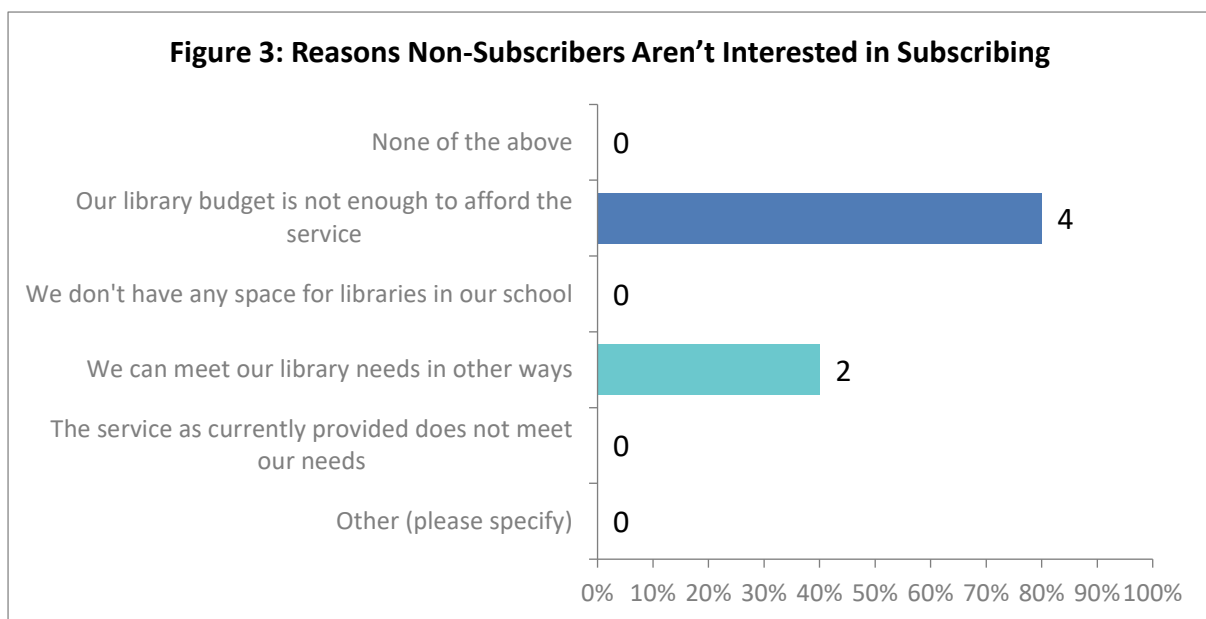
Figure 2 displays the breakdown of non-subscribers responding to the survey saying what would make a difference to their ability to subscribe to the SLS. Respondents could choose more than one option. Most respondents said that they would consider subscribing if their school was able to allocate more funding to library resources (4). Three respondents selected “other” which were detailed as follows:

- “Cost of the service.”
- “We can't afford it.”
- “More cost-effective service.”

Respondents were also asked whether they had any other comments to make about their responses. The one comment provided here further reflects that schools may have their own financial difficulties that are keeping them from being able to subscribe to the service:

- “Currently the library SLA is quite costly for a one form entry school and this prohibits us from always being able to buy into it.”

Five respondents representing schools that do not currently subscribe and are not considering doing so provided reasons for this, which are displayed in **Figure 3**. Respondents could choose more than one option.



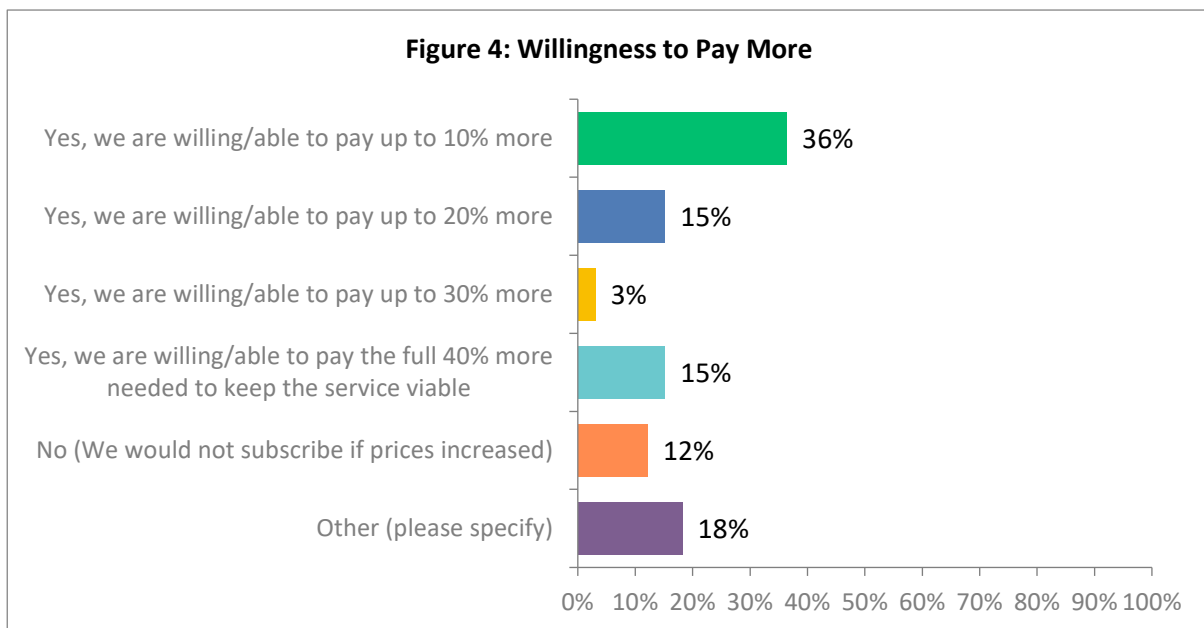
Once again, respondents were asked to leave any further comments to explain their answers. The following comments reflect the themes around financial constraints that have thus far dominated. However, they also reflect that some schools manage their library services on their own through other means:

- “We withdrew from the library service a number of years ago. In the following years, we invested in boosting our fiction and nonfiction books in our school and class libraries. All the books we purchased were an exact match for our curriculum. We purchased multiple copies of a number of key books - my memory is that we couldn't borrow multiple copies of the same title from SLS at the time. It was fortunate for us, that we had the financial capacity to do that. Due to the current budget situation, our spending on books will drastically reduce this year (24-25). For us this is manageable because we are very well stocked - I guess this will be very tricky for some schools.”
- “The school has been required to consistently find savings within its budget for the last 6 years. The library service is a cost that we concluded that we could remove with minimal impact on provision in school.”
- “Our school manages its own library provision currently.”

- “We did for many years and would love to have kept subscribing but for a small school the subscription was too much. It was a real wrench to stop.”

4 Future Subscription and Increased Costs

Schools responding to the survey that already subscribe to the SLS were asked whether they would be able to cover increased costs to maintain the service going forward. As was explained in the introduction to the consultation, the SLS currently runs at a deficit, and would need to increase its subscription costs by 40% in the next financial year in order to cover its running costs (see Figure 4).

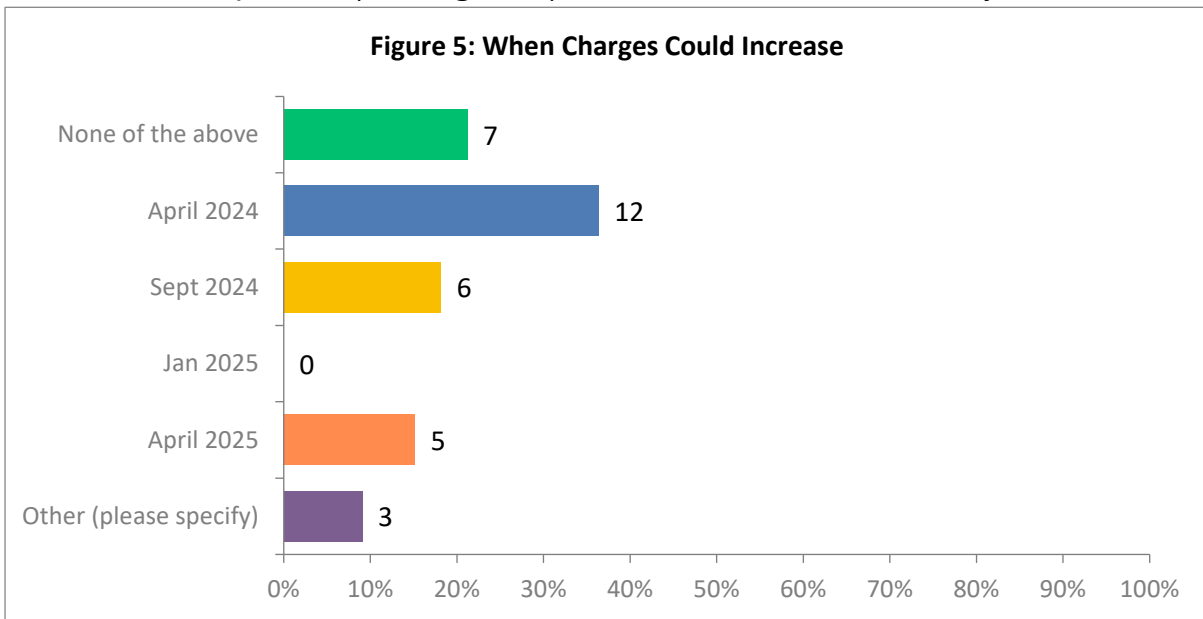


Notably, most (69%) of the 33 respondents that answered this question said that they would be willing to pay more to keep the service. However, only 15% of respondents (5 schools) said that they would be willing to pay the full 40% more that is needed to keep the service viable.

Six respondents to this question chose “other”. One respondent said that this would not be their decision to make. Another said that they are not convinced that the price would need to increase by 40%. The remaining four respondents all talked about equally tight budgets facing schools.

- “I think we would continue to subscribe if prices increased but as a small rural primary school we are under a lot of financial pressure as well- we had to close a class last year so now have an EYFS/ KS1 class and a KS2 class.”
- “We unfortunately may not be able to afford a price increase.”
- “We are unable to pay any more due to budgets.”
- “This would be tight as our budget is tight too.”

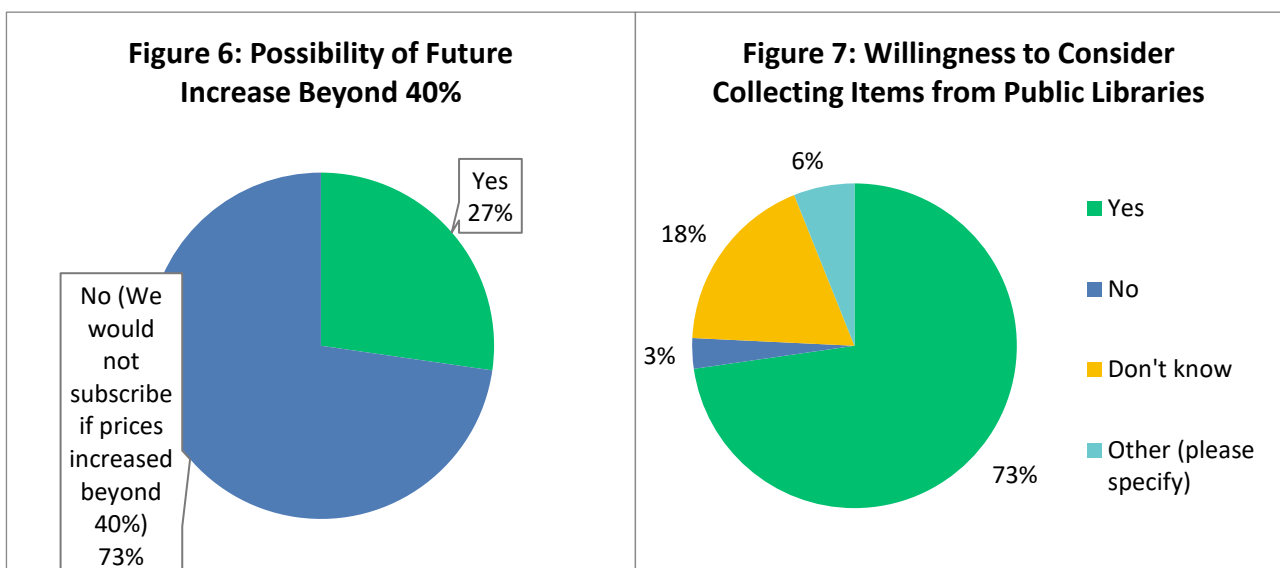
When asked when they might be prepared for the increase in charges to commence, 33 schools responded (see Figure 5). 12 schools indicated that they would be



prepared for those charges to commence immediately, beginning April 2024 (when the survey was first released). A further six said that this school year would be acceptable (September 2024). Five schools indicated that next financial year would be possible (April 2025), and a further school that answered “other” said that immediately would be possible, but next financial year preferable. The other two respondents answering “other” were unsure.

The survey indicated that an increase in prices beyond 40% might be necessary in future years to keep the service viable, and schools were asked whether they could support a further price increase beyond 40% at a later stage. Nine schools said that they could do so, while 24 said that they could not (see Figure 6).

Many schools (24) said that they would be happy to consider collecting items from their public library if this helped secure the viability of the service, indicating that this is a potentially palatable avenue for savings should the service be interested in

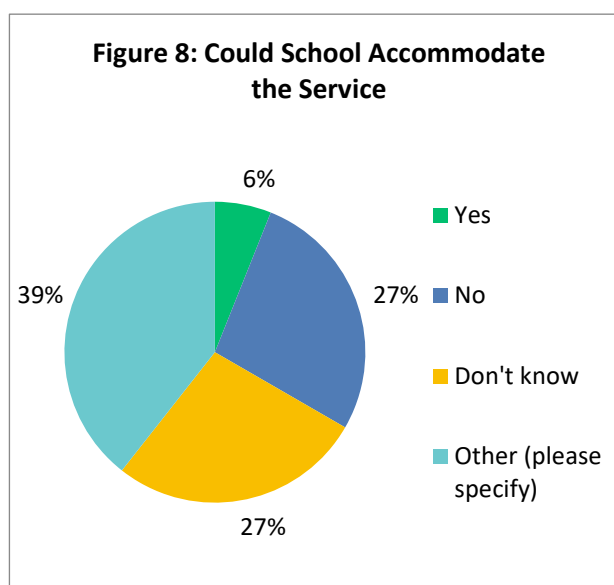


exploring it further (see Figure 7, above). One of the respondents selecting “other” noted that this would not be an ideal solution, however, and one respondent said they would not be able to do this.

Another possible avenue for cost savings that the survey explored with schools was to ask whether any might be able to accommodate the service, or part of the service, in order to secure its future viability.

While 18 respondents said no, or that they didn’t know if they could do this, two respondents said that they could do so (see Figure 8).

Most of the respondents selecting “other” on this question also said that they did not have the room to accommodate it. However, one school selecting “other” said that they had spoken to a primary school that did not respond to the survey but would be interested in hosting it.¹ One school also responding under “other” said:



- “We don't have a building but have large grounds and if the Council provided a demountable we would be prepared to host it.”

5 Impacts of Closure and Alternative Suggestions

Impacts

Respondents were asked to describe what the impacts would be on their schools of either continuing their subscription at increased cost or ending their subscription. 26 respondents provided detailed comments in response to this question, which have been grouped into themes presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Themes – Impacts of Increased Costs or Service Ending	Count	%
Losing subscription would mean loss of quality and range of texts schools can access	14	30%
Direct impact on children's learning	14	30%
Cost implications both ways, as would have to buy more books to replace loss of service	8	17%
Paying more not possible/difficult, as budgets are too tight with other priorities	6	13%
Unequal impacts on disadvantaged children and small/rural schools	4	9%

¹ The name of this school has been redacted from this public report, but has been made available to the SLS team.

14 respondents made the point that losing their subscription would mean a **loss of the quality and range of texts** that the school would have access to. For example:

- “We would not be able to access the wide range of resources that we currently access to support the delivery of the curriculum.”

In a correlated, though distinct theme, 14 respondents also said that a loss of the SLS would have a **direct impact on children’s learning**. For example:

- “It would have a detrimental impact upon children's learning, especially reading and language development, should the library service close.”

Eight schools noted that there are **cost implications either way** – whether schools lose their subscription to the SLS or not – as they would have to spend money to try to make up for the loss of texts required for them to deliver the curriculum. For example:

- “Budget implications either way. We would have to purchase more resources as we would not be able to borrow them or paying more would also have a cost implication.”

Six respondents said that they **could not pay more for the service, or that paying more might be very difficult** and require them giving up other priorities. For example:

- “Budgets are very tight and it therefore often becomes a matter of prioritisation: the SLS is valued but sometimes there are more pressing expenditure concerns.”

Finally, four respondents made the point that **losing the SLS would have unequal impacts on some populations**; especially disadvantaged areas and small or more rural schools with less ability to find ways to subsidise their curriculum with other sources. For example:

- “It would have a detrimental impact on every child's education.... We keep hearing that the Council can't afford to keep anything that isn't statutory but access to reading materials, particularly for disadvantaged children will be impacted by this proposed cut. What is the equality impact on them?”

Alternatives

Respondents were asked to provide suggestions for alternative ways that the SLS might bundle its services to create a different pricing structure that might work for schools. 16 respondents provided detailed responses to this question, with a total of seven main themes emerging (**see Table 5**). Again, some comments contained more than one theme. Examples of comments illustrating each theme are included below.

Table 5. Themes – Suggestions for Alternative Bundling/Cost Structures	Count	%
Collection/drop off by schools or charge for delivery	4	19%
Trimming services to the most used only	4	19%
Third party support/sponsorship/fundraising	3	14%
Increase subscribers/publicity of the service	3	14%
Moving to another location	2	10%
Pricing structure based on school size	2	10%
Other	3	14%

Four respondents agreed with suggestions earlier in the survey that **collection and drop off by schools, eliminating the current delivery service**, might be a good possible way to achieve savings. A few schools went further, however, and suggested that the SLS could cease delivery for schools who were happy to collect resources but start charging for those who still wished for delivery. For example:

- “Determine which schools can collect their books from the library and which schools need them delivering (and charge extra to those that require delivery).”

Four respondents also said that **trimming the services down** to the bare minimum – particularly those services that are most needed/used by schools – might be another option to achieve savings. For example:

- “I wasn’t aware of the full range of services so possibly trimming down to the essential few might help the delivery of the service.”

Three respondents had some **creative ideas about fundraising or approaching potentially supportive third parties** about the service’s future viability. All three are below:

- “Could the DfE Reading Hubs be approached to help with the viability of the service.”
- “Perhaps volunteer to help drop off/pick up or put boxes together? Fund raiser annually- all schools take part.”
- “Have any sponsors been approached? DHL do a lot of philanthropic deliveries. What about Waterstones or a book chain? Could the artefact boxes be administered separately by the Museum Service?”

Three respondents also suggested that **increasing publicity of the service in order to attract more subscribers**. For example:

- “I think we need to get more schools aware of the benefits and sign up. That could keep costs down.”

Two respondents picked up on the suggestion elsewhere in the questionnaire about the possibility of a **change of venue**. One suggested that a cheaper venue was a good idea, the other had some more specific suggestions:

- “Why can the new SLS not be housed in the Guildhall or shopping centre and there be no additional cost?”

Two respondents suggested that a **pricing structure based on school size** would make more sense going forward, as presumably schools with more students use the service more (thus costing more as subscribers).

Three respondents made “**other**” comments that were less about making suggestions and more about expressing concerns that the service might end.

Another question in the survey asked a slightly different question of schools about possible alternatives. Rather than asking about cost structures or bundled services, this question asked for suggestions more broadly about ideas for how the service might be run with reduced costs or in ways that might make it more viable. 19 respondents answered this question, and their responses were grouped thematically (see **Table 6**). Examples of comments are provided below.

Table 6. Themes – Alternative Suggestions for Viability	Count	%
Collection/drop off by schools or charge for delivery	9	29%
Trimming services or more tiered pricing	6	19%
Moving to another location	5	16%
Third party support/sponsorship/fundraising	4	13%
Research what works elsewhere	2	6%
School budgets need to increase	2	6%
Get more schools to subscribe	2	6%
More automated processes	1	3%

Several of the same themes raised in **Table 5** (above) were also raised here.

Ceasing collection or charging for delivery, trimming services or introducing more tiers within the pricing structure for various services, **moving to another location**, and **encouraging more schools to subscribe** were previously suggested ideas that came up again among respondents to this question.

Two respondents simply said that **schools’ budgets needed to increase**.

Some newer ideas came to the fore with this question as well. For example, two respondents suggested **researching what works elsewhere** to keep library services viable, such as in the public library system, or school library services in other regions.

One respondent suggested **introducing more automated processes**, such as book ordering, so that the service might be able to cut down on staff hours.

Some of the suggestions for working with third parties and/or looking into fundraising or sponsorship opportunities were also new. For example:

- “Access to a national scheme or charity for book stock to reduce costs in purchasing new books for the service.”
- “Fundraiser event- each year. Crowd funding. Volunteer dropping off books/pick up.”

- “Can the service access any bid? Lottery funding etc.”
- “What about exploring grants or sponsorship given the national drive and initiatives for reading. Could a celebrity author be enlisted to help highlight this problem and find solutions.”

Finally, respondents were asked whether there were any other comments they wished to make. 18 respondents provided comments here, and their main themes are presented in **Table 7**. The majority of these were to express praise for the SLS or to offer well wishes as the service tried to work out how to become financially viable.

Table 7. Themes – Any Other Comments	Count	%
Praise/appreciation for the service	10	38%
Expressions of sadness at impacts of loss	9	35%
Carefully consider change/listen to voices	3	12%
Cannot afford increased costs	2	8%
What will happen to resources?	1	4%
Profile of service should be raised	1	4%

Most of the respondents offering comments on this question (10) expressed **praise or appreciation for the service** and its benefits. For example:

- “Just to say how much we appreciate and rely on this service and hope that we can find a way forward.”

A similar number (9) **expressed sadness at the impacts that losing the service would have**. For example:

- “It would be a great shame for schools to lose this service. The staff are invaluable and we always use them to support our library leaders and audit our library. Schools would simply not be able to provide what they have been without this service.”

Three respondents **urged the SLS to consider changes very carefully**, and to ensure that all voices were heard (including the public and communities) in the consultation. For example:

- “This service has been built up and cannot be rebuilt once it's gone. Its loss would affect every child in the county. Whilst not a mandatory service, it is, in the scheme of things, a small cost saving for the council but would have a disproportionately negative impact on hundreds of Shropshire families.”
- “Take into account the views of local residents and tax payers into consideration.”

One respondent asked what **would happen to the resources** currently held in the SLS should the service cease, and wondered whether they would be able to purchase some of the key topic texts and artefacts that they used regularly.

Another school noted that the **profile of the SLS should be raised**.

6 Summary and Conclusion

In summary, the SLS is a vital and valuable service for many schools in Shropshire that helps provide the quality and diversity of resources required to teach their curriculum as well as enhancing the access to reading materials for children in their schools. Several schools in the consultation expressed dismay at the impacts that losing the service would have on their teaching and learning.

Most respondents currently subscribing to the service were willing to take on an increase in their subscription charge. Overall, however, very few schools indicated that they are able to pay the additional 40% subscription charge that Shropshire Council is proposing would be required to keep the service financially viable in the short term.

Some schools did offer suggestions for alternative options that might be considered to help with cutting costs or improving savings within service delivery. These included:

- The offer from more than one school to house the service, at least in part.
- Ideas about ceasing delivery options or charging schools for them as an added service.
- Suggestions for trimming back all but the most used services but keeping the same rates.
- Suggestions and personal offers of support for fundraising or third-party involvement to help improve viability.

In conclusion, some combination of an increased subscription rate, which most respondents indicate that they are willing to pay, alongside a reduction in services such as delivery and staffing hours, should be considered to keep the service running. Responses to this survey indicate that schools – even those not currently subscribing – would on the whole prefer a significantly reduced service to losing the service altogether.

Very many thanks are extended to the 57 schools that responded to this survey and took the time to provide thoughtful feedback and support. 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.

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