

UK Supreme Court rejects appeal over Brent library closures

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The Supreme Court has refused campaigners any further appeal against the closure of six libraries in the northwest London Borough of Brent. This follows the Court of Appeal's decision in December to uphold the High Court's original ruling supporting the legal right of the council to close down any services it chose.

Campaigners, led by the group Brent SOS Libraries, argued through the courts that the council's decision was "flawed and unlawful". But the Supreme Court decided there was no "arguable point of law" for an appeal, closing off any legal avenue for campaigners.

Samantha Warrington of Brent SOS Libraries said they will continue to push for the secretary of state to hold "a public inquiry into Brent's failure to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service"—a futile appeal to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.

The government's response will no doubt mirror that of Labour-led Brent Council. Ann John, the council's leader, told press, "This final decision of the Supreme Court fully vindicates Brent Council's actions and upholds the earlier decisions...that the council acted lawfully".

The campaign group is challenging Brent's decision to cut six libraries, half of its library provision, as part of a programme of £41.7 million for 2011/2012. More cuts are on the agenda for the following year.

In place of the existing comprehensive coverage of local libraries, the major political parties and the media are promoting the construction of one centralised "super library". As hundreds of libraries are threatened with closure in London and across the country, three new London "super libraries" are reportedly "bucking that trend", with more to follow.

The multimillion-pound libraries have opened within the space of two months in London. Last November, Southwark's Canada Water Library opened in Surrey

Quays. It was designed at a cost of £14 million. On January 4, Lewisham opened a library as part of the £24 million Deptford Lounge complex. Hackney Council finally opened its £4 million rebuilt CLR James Library in Dalston in January. This building is twice the size of its predecessor. Last year, Hackney cut a quarter of their library staff.

In addition, Birmingham will soon have the largest library in Europe.

Critics have noted that these "super libraries" cannot replace closed local libraries. In a recent article on the publiclibrariesnews.com web site, Ian Anstice explained, "They do not serve truly local communities—you need to have at least some money to get to them, which is a big consideration for the elderly and the unemployed. They take longer to get to than a local branch. That's a big consideration for a schoolchild. Three major clients of public libraries are excluded right there."

These libraries are not bucking the trend. Rather, they are part of a move to the public financing of services under private management. Rationing and privatising services is now the priority of councils, which are cutting service provision to meet budgets set by the government.

The new libraries are dependent on private contractors for their management. Capita has won contracts at the new Southwark Library. Capita's library arm is promoting consolidated shared services under private management as a means of "maintaining the service with fewer resources".

Capita has been particularly active in the privatisation of local government. Last year, it won a five-year £15 million contract to provide Brent's council tax and business rates administration. Its education wing also provides teaching staff to Brent schools.

As money flows into the private sector, local areas face the closure of buildings, job losses and pay freezes. The other alternative being promoted under these circumstances is for services to be provided by community groups on a voluntary basis.

This too would provide the means for the privatisation of library services. The London Borough of Bexley is promoting charity administration of its libraries. Greener Bexley, which is taking over Bexley Village library, will maintain a basic free service while offering a more advanced service by subscription.

More immediately, it would end the provision of a service by trained and paid staff. This route was heavily promoted by campaigners against the closure of Gloucestershire and Somerset libraries, who were advancing the idea of volunteers to run the services.

This also involved campaigners offering councils advice on how to make cuts, including redundancies, even when done with the best of intentions. Brent SOS Libraries, for example, advanced a business plan for the community to run the library at no cost to the council.

The anger of people in the affected areas is very real, but it cannot be channeled into a fight over how to cut already limited resources with the least pain.

The Brent SOS Libraries campaign has received widespread support from local families, teachers and council workers. High-profile campaigners like playwright Alan Bennett, author Zadie Smith and artist Jamie Reid have all been vocal in their support. Such support has to be galvanised into an opposition to all cuts by mobilising the working class people that are most affected.

The Supreme Court ruling underlines the impossibility of challenging library closures solely from a legal standpoint. The law accepts fully the need to cut services to balance the council's books, without considering the implications or needs and concerns of the majority of the population.

Emboldened by the court decision, Brent Council stated that it had failed to make £400,000 of savings because of delays due to the court cases in closing half of its libraries. This, it said, will result in cuts to other services. The Environment and Neighborhood Services department still needs to make £250,000 in savings before the end of the financial year.

This, plus the £170,000 the council spent defending its decision to axe six libraries, means it has had to find

alternative cuts in other areas to balance its budget, including to schools and hospitals.

At the end of last year, the council spent £15,000 on an awards ceremony in which the team behind the library closures was honoured.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted previously, "Libraries, like other social services, cannot be defended on a piecemeal, council by council basis. Councils will look to incorporate opposition groups that take this approach and use them as advisers or pawns in their cuts agenda."



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