



# Have your say

## Budget 2023-24: Library Services

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### LIBRARY SERVICES Budget Options



Consultation: 8 December 2022 – 15 January 2023

Report: 17 January 2023

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# 1.0 Executive Summary

The Council currently provides fifteen library sites in Wirral from where residents can borrow books, use computer and internet facilities, and attend events. Physical library usage and book borrowing has been in decline for a number of years, as online and digital media has increased in popularity.

Post pandemic use of libraries has seen a further decline in the way that residents use libraries, and the introduction of more digital access and online services, has added to this.

The Council must fund the operation and maintenance of all library buildings and although libraries do generate a modest income, it is not enough to cover the costs of the Library Service.

This proposal will look to find savings through reducing the current library offer.

Public consultation was held on the Library Budget Option from 8 December 2022 to 15 January 2023 allowing people to provide their view of the options. The findings from the consultation are included in this report.

The findings will be considered at the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee on the 25 January 2023.

## 1.1 Key Findings

- The questionnaire was responded to by 951 people. 745 responses came through the online portal, 206 paper copies were completed.
- 55.7% of the respondents were in disagreement with the proposal to consider relocating Birkenhead Central and Wallasey Central libraries into other Council buildings, in the same area, that are not fully used. 42.5% strongly disagreed. 30.8% were in agreement (Question 1).
- 64.7% of the responses were in disagreement with the proposal that the Council could consider reducing the size of its library service, 45.5% strongly disagreed. 28.1% were in agreement.

Out of the 3 proposals put forward in this consultation this one garnered the highest levels of disagreement. (Question 2).

- 57.9% of the responses were in disagreement with the proposal to consider moving some of its library sites into other Council buildings, reducing the overall number of library sites it currently provides. 40.2% strongly disagreed. 33.2% were in agreement (Question 3).
- Amongst the additional free text comments, the most prevalent themes were jointly: (Question 4)
  - Cuts to library services will disproportionately affect the most deprived and vulnerable in society (30.2%).
  - The importance of libraries to communities (30.2%), and the idea that they are “more than just a place to borrow books”.
- Demographic analysis allowed the responses to be categorised by ward. New Brighton (13.5%) and Wallasey (12.2%) were the most represented Wirral wards. Eastham (1.1%) and Bidston and St James (1.5%) were the least well represented.

## 2.0 Methodology

The consultation was carried out between 8 December 2022 to 15 January 2023. The approach used was an online public consultation through the 'Have your say' consultation portal at [www.haveyoursay.wirral.gov.uk](http://www.haveyoursay.wirral.gov.uk)

A budget consultation Hub was created within the platform which provided users with one single location through which to engage in individual service consultations and access a Budget Simulator tool <https://haveyoursay.wirral.gov.uk/hub-page/budget-2023-24> Within the Hub there was a page dedicated to the Library Budget Options consultation.

An online questionnaire was provided for residents to engage with. Respondents were also able to request paper copies or for help completing the questionnaire, or submit additional comments via a dedicated email address, which was published on the 'Have your say' website alongside the online tool.

Following the consultation, the feedback will be considered at the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee on the 25 January 2023.

### 2.1 Questionnaire

The consultation questionnaire was developed around understanding resident views on the options presented for reducing the cost of the library services. Key areas in the options included relocation of sites to other Council buildings, reducing the size of the library service, deployment of a mobile library and provision of an online digital library offer.

To enable further understanding, and in-depth analysis, respondents were invited to provide free-text comments to expand on their ideas or concerns. Following closure of the consultation, the responses to each of the direct questions were collated and the responses included in this report. For the free-text comment questions, a text coding approach was used based on the reoccurring themes. This data was then collated and summarised in the report.

### 2.2 Analysis of Respondents

Respondents to the online tools were provided with the option to provide demographic information about themselves. It must be noted that this is an option and that not all respondents included this information. This data allows the demographic results to be included in this report to enable analysis of the scope of responses and representation from different demographic groups.

### 2.3 Interpretation of Results

In terms of the results, it is important to note that:

- The public consultation is not representative of the overall population but provides information on the opinion of those residents who engaged.
- Free-text questions that offered respondents the option to provide written feedback could have covered multiple themes. Therefore, with free-text responses were categorised using a coding system. The percentages given reflect the percentage of respondents who made the comment and as they may have made more than one comment, the total percentage may exceed 100%.

## 2.4 Direct Representations

Contact details were provided to enable organisation, groups, or special interest groups to directly submit their responses to the budget proposals.

## 2.5 Communication

To ensure the consultations were as accessible as possible, a social and digital sub campaign was carried out, which included regular messaging, targeted demographical and geographical communications, resident e-newsletters, and regular theme specific stories, linking with the narrative, and urging residents and stakeholders to take part in the consultation. communication channels included (but not limited to):

- Social media messaging across a variety of platforms.
- Dedicated email address (for comments, ideas, request for paper copies etc).
- Paper copies in libraries and leisure centres.
- WirralView news channel – article and links.
- Links and details in weekly Resident E-Newsletter.
- Digital and social links to the ‘Have Your Say’ Hub.
- Online redirection through local news platforms.
- Council website notices.
- Internal / Staff communications.
- Local media briefing/ media management.
- Member briefing.
- Sharing of links and paper copy locations with CVF sector.

# 3.0 Results

## 3.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was responded to by 951 people. 745 responses came through the online portal, 206 paper copies were completed. No questions were mandatory so respondents could choose which questions to respond to.

### 3.1.1 Question 1: The Council could consider relocating Birkenhead Central and Wallasey Central libraries into other Council buildings, in the same area, that are not fully used

943 people answered this question. Respondents selected their corresponding level of agreement with the statement offered.

55.7% of the respondents were in disagreement with the proposal (42.5% strongly disagree and 13.1% disagree) whilst 38.0% were in agreement (17.2% strongly agree and 20.8% agree). 6.4% neither agreed nor disagreed.

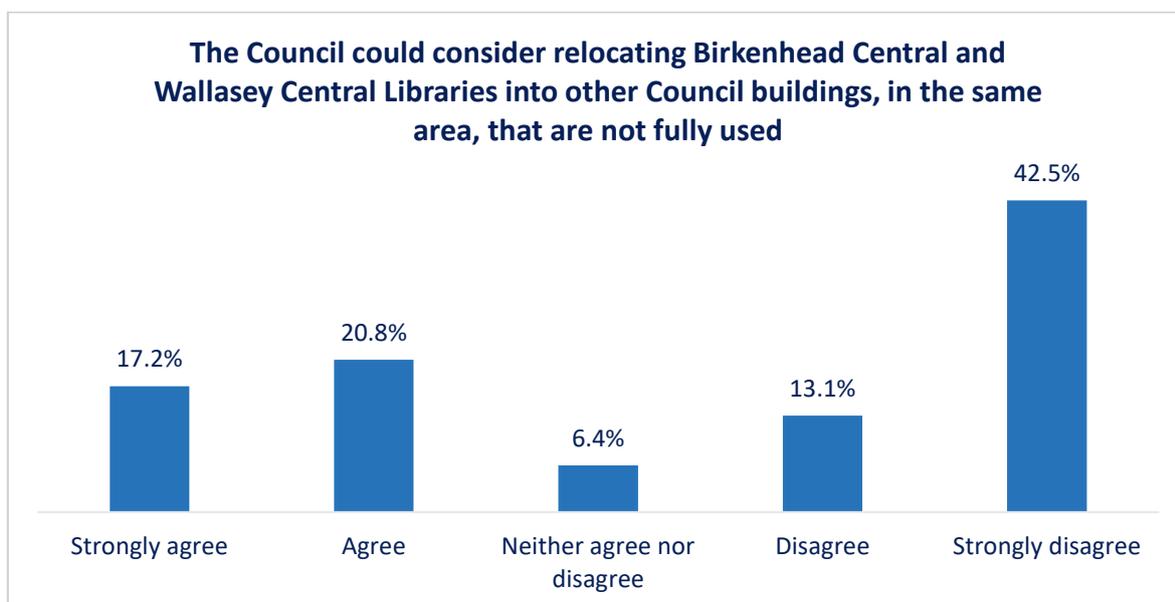


Figure 1: Chart displaying results to “the Council could consider relocating Birkenhead Central and Wallasey Central libraries into other Council buildings, in the same area, that are not fully used”

<b>The Council could consider relocating Birkenhead Central and Wallasey Central Libraries into other Council buildings, in the same area, that are not fully used</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Strongly agree	162	17.2%
Agree	196	20.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	60	6.4%
Disagree	124	13.1%
Strongly disagree	401	42.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>943</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

*Table 1: Table displaying the results to “the Council could consider relocating Birkenhead Central and Wallasey Central libraries into other Council buildings, in the same area, that are not fully used”*

### 3.1.2 Question 2: The Council could consider reducing the size of its library service

945 people answered this question. Respondents selected their corresponding level of agreement with the statement offered.

64.7% of the responses were in disagreement with the proposal (45.5% strongly disagree and 19.2% disagree) whilst 28.1% were in agreement (10.9% strongly agree and 17.2% agree). 7.2% neither agreed nor disagreed.

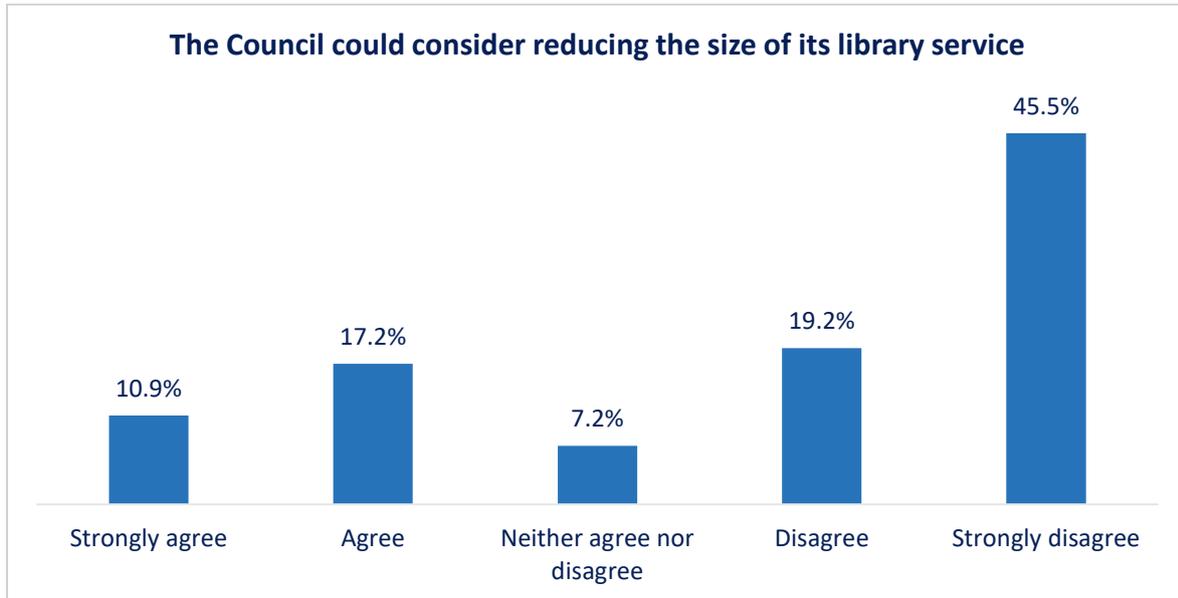


Figure 2: Chart displaying results to “the Council could consider reducing the size of its library service”

The Council could consider reducing the size of its library service	Total	%
Strongly agree	103	10.9%
Agree	163	17.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	68	7.2%
Disagree	181	19.2%
Strongly disagree	430	45.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>945</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 2: Table displaying the results to “the Council could consider reducing the size of its library service”

### 3.1.3 Question 3: The Council could consider moving some of its library sites into other Council buildings reducing the overall number of library sites it currently provides

945 people answered this question. Respondents selected their corresponding level of agreement with the statement offered.

57.9% of the responses were in disagreement with the proposal (40.2% strongly disagree and 17.7% disagree) whilst 33.2% were in agreement (13.8% strongly agree and 19.5% agree). 8.9% neither agreed nor disagreed.

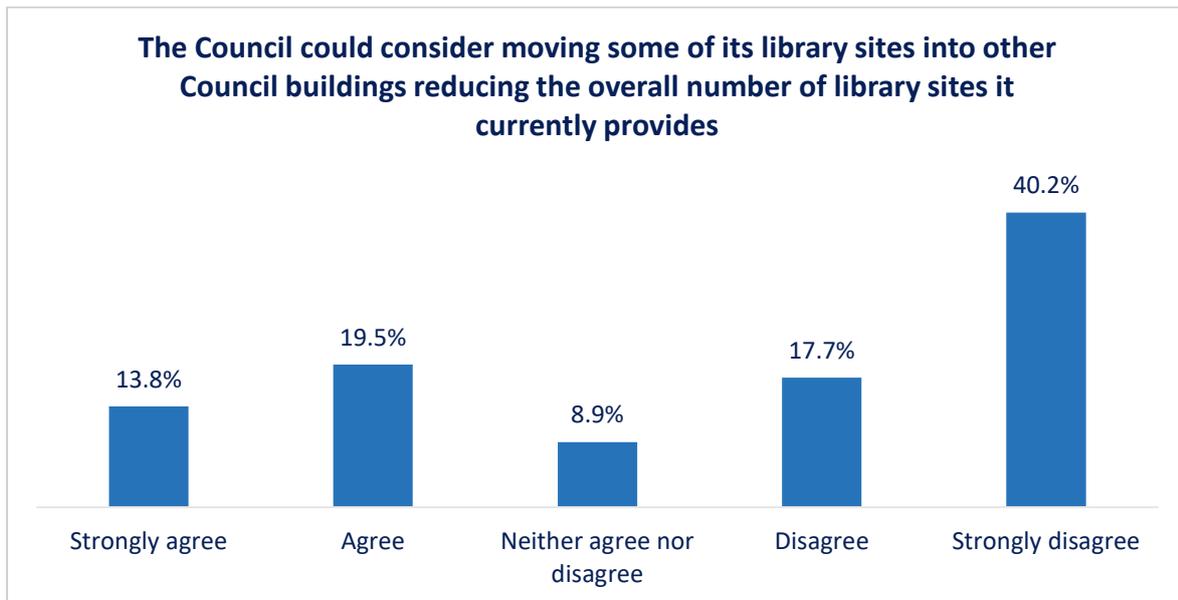


Figure 3: Chart displaying results to “the Council could consider moving some of its library sites into other Council buildings reducing the overall number of library sites it currently provides”

The Council could consider moving some of its library sites into other Council buildings reducing the overall number of library sites it currently provides	Total	%
Strongly agree	130	13.8%
Agree	184	19.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	84	8.9%
Disagree	167	17.7%
Strongly disagree	380	40.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>945</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 3: Table displaying the results to “the Council could consider moving some of its library sites into other Council buildings reducing the overall number of library sites it currently provides”

### 3.1.4 Question 4: Additional comments

287 people answered this free text question.

Below are the top themes that emerged from the free-text comments as a percentage of the number of people who provided an answer to the question. As the percentage reflects the proportion of respondents who made the comment and that respondents may have made more than one comment in their answer, the total percentages may exceed 100%.

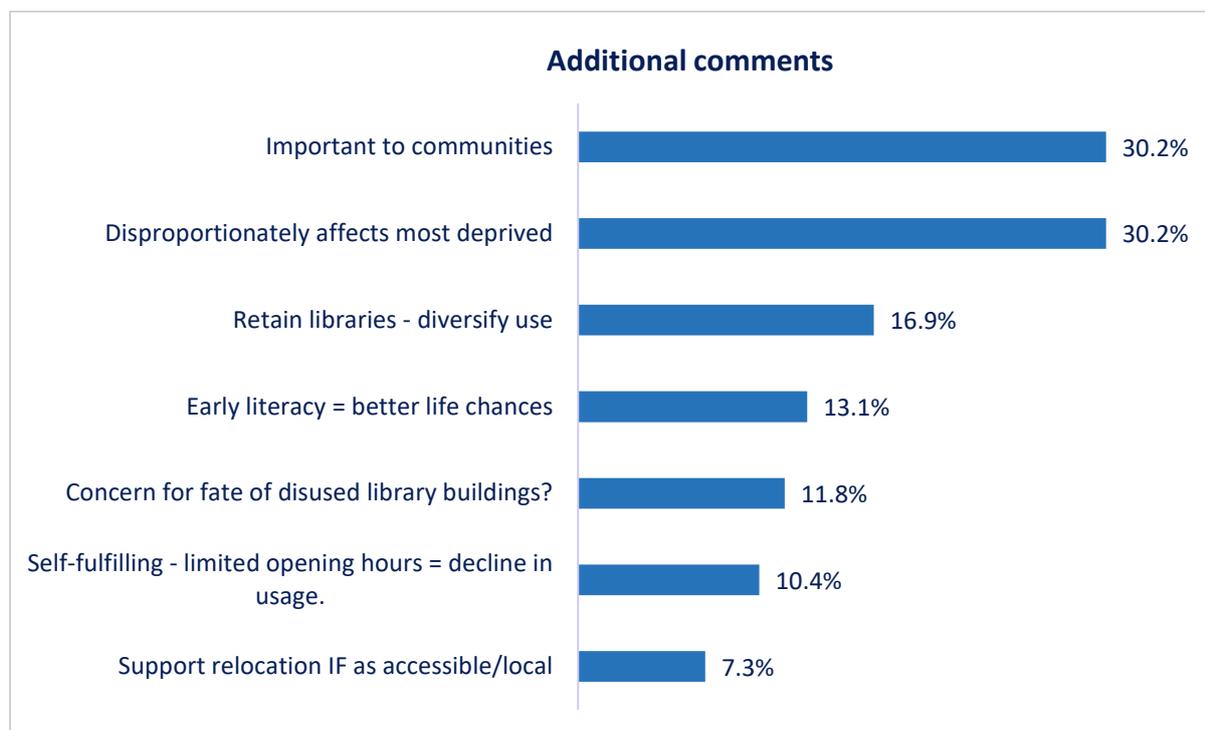


Figure 4: Chart displaying top themes among additional comments

Additional Comments: Top themes	Total	%
Important to communities	166	30.2%
Disproportionately affects most deprived	166	30.2%
Retain libraries - diversify use	93	16.9%
Early literacy = better life chances	72	13.1%
Concern for fate of disused library buildings?	65	11.8%
Self-fulfilling - limited opening hours = decline in usage.	57	10.4%
Support relocation IF as accessible/local	40	7.3%

Table 4: Table displaying top themes among additional comments

- Cuts to library services will disproportionately affect the most deprived and vulnerable in society (30.2%).** Those who do not have the facilities to access digital content will be unable to access not only free books and audio books online, but also the in-person support currently available in the libraries. Furthermore, closing or relocating local libraries will mean travel, at cost, to more remote sites, again

disadvantaging those who can least afford this and in effect removing their access to library services altogether.

- **The importance of libraries to communities (30.2%),** and the idea that they are “more than just a place to borrow books”. They offer safe, warm, cost-free spaces, the opportunity to interact with others and join in community activities.
- **Increase profitability and usage of libraries via diversification of use (16.9%).** Suggestions are varied but include the addition of cafes to libraries, hiring out venue space for local groups/parties/meetings and/or providing chargeable hot desks for remote working.
- **Early literacy is an important determinant of future life chances (13.1%).** Removing or reducing library services will reduce the life chances of Wirral’s children. Libraries help to foster an early love of reading, and physical books are preferable to consuming content via a screen.
- **Concern for the fate of disused library buildings (11.8%).** Particularly Birkenhead and Wallasey libraries, which are housed in historic buildings that are important to the local area. There is concern that buildings will be allowed to become derelict, contributing to the decline of local areas, or, in the case of historic buildings, lost to unwelcome development.
- **Decline in usage is self-fulfilling (10.4%)** The failure to fully open following the pandemic, and the ongoing severely reduced opening hours have contributed to a false picture of declining usage. It is also noted that borrowing figures do not necessarily reflect usage/footfall.
- **Tentative support for relocation depending on new sites (7.3%)** A common theme was that relocation might be supported if the chosen sites remained sufficiently local and accessible, but that currently there was not enough detail as to proposed sites to agree with the proposal.

## 3.2 Direct Representations

Three direct representations were received from individual Library users. The representations are included in Appendix 1.

# 4.0 Demographics and Site Traffic

## 4.1 Demographics

Registration was required to engage in the online Library Services consultation. The registration form included questions regarding demographics including gender, age group, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, however not all questions in the registration form were compulsory and respondents could choose to select 'prefer not to say' or skip the question. The demographics results are summarised below. The same questions were included on the paper-copy questionnaires.

Most respondents (87.7%) classed themselves as local residents.



Figure 5: Chart displaying who respondents are registering as

The age group profile is illustrated below with the most common age groups being 65-47 years (22.6%), followed by 55-64 years (22.2%) and 35-44 years (19.5%). Under 24 years only made up 1.6% of respondents.

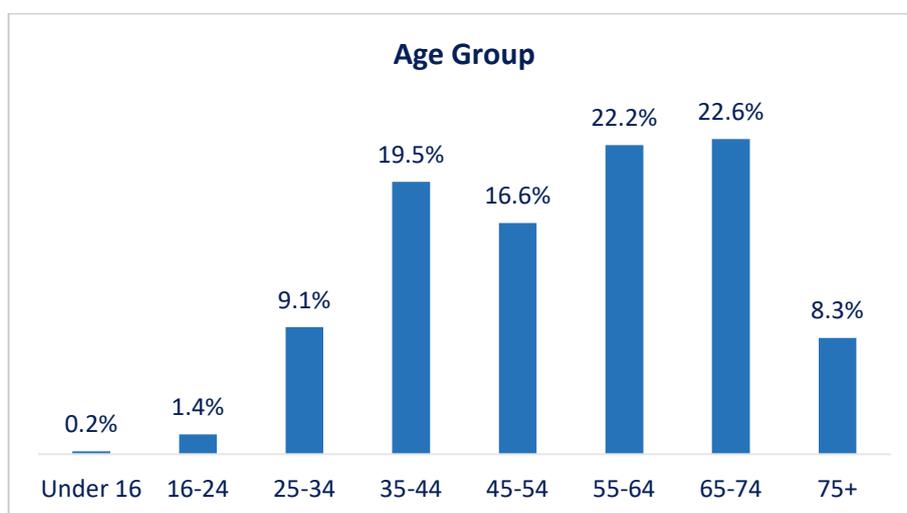


Figure 6: Chart displaying age groups

63.7% of respondents identified as female and, 32.5% male. 3.5% preferred not to say and 0.3% preferred to use their own term.

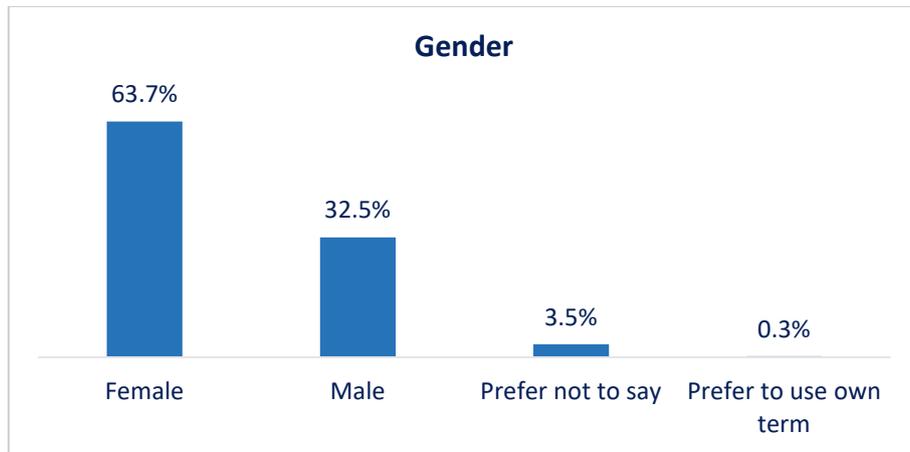


Figure 7: Chart displaying gender

82.6% of respondents were heterosexual, 1.3% were gay/ lesbian, 1.7% bisexual and 14.3% preferred not to say.

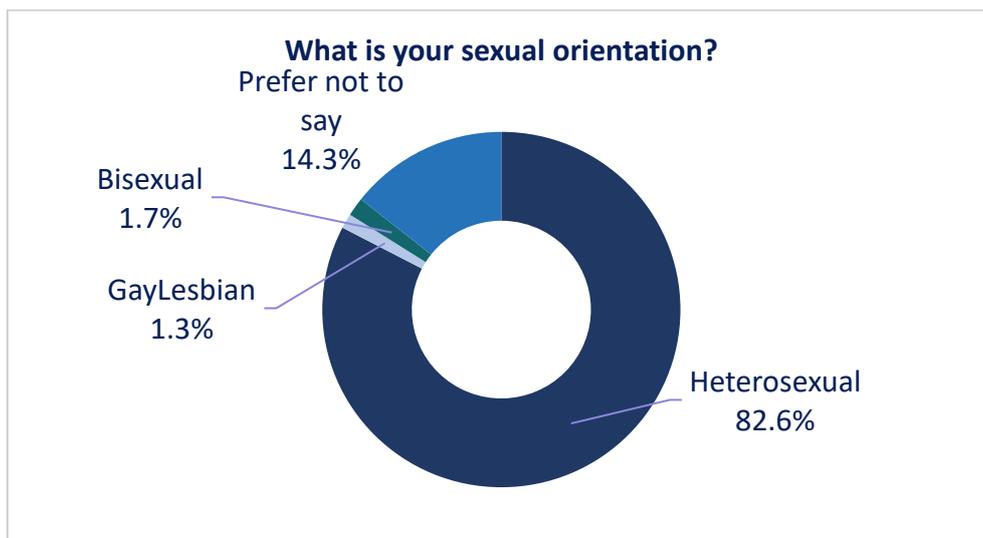


Figure 8: Chart displaying sexual orientation

81.2% said they did not have a disability whilst 12.2% of respondents said that they had a disability, 6.6% preferred not to say.

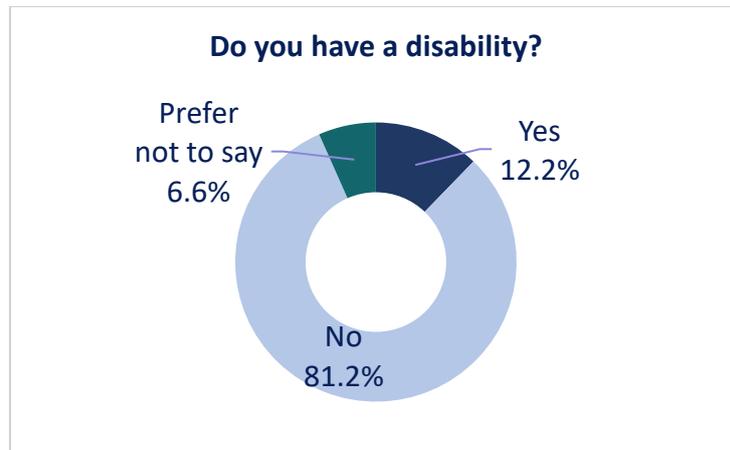


Figure 9: Chart displaying disability

The majority (93.3%) of respondents identified as White – English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British. 6.7% of respondents were not from White – English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British backgrounds.

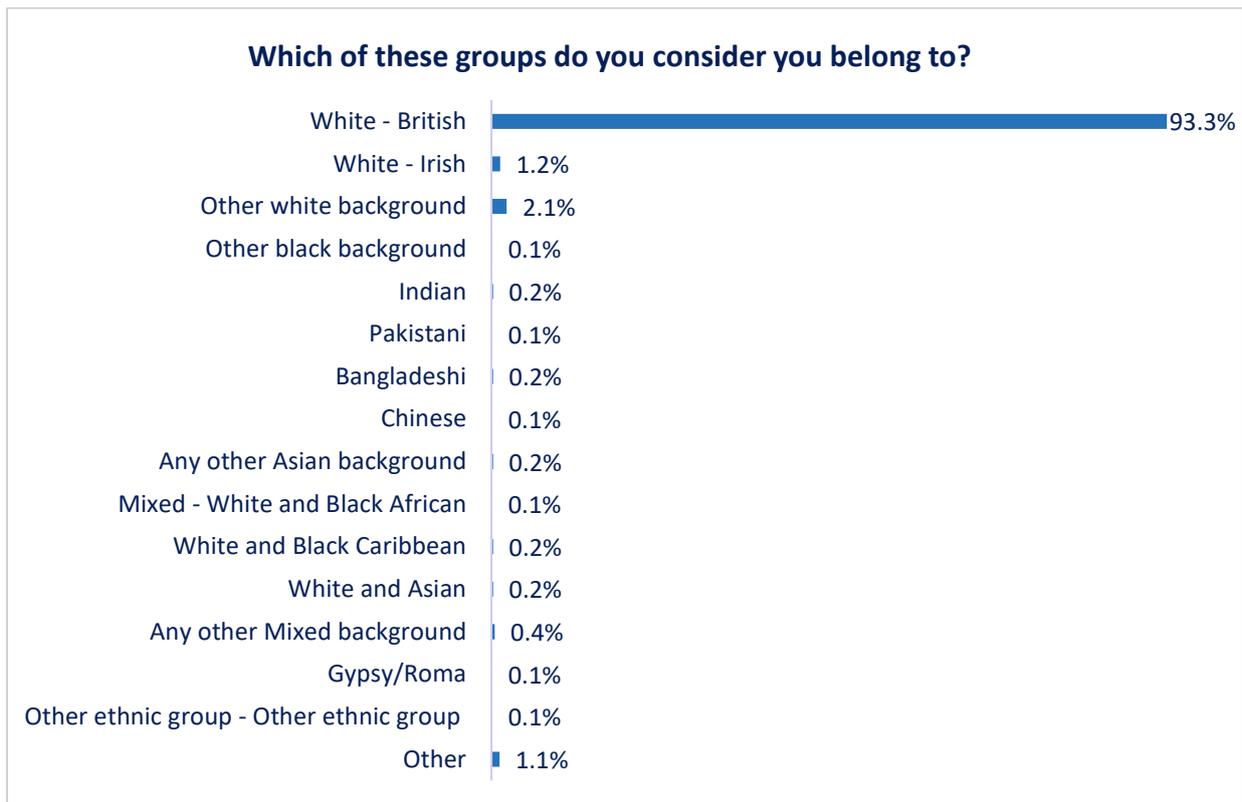


Figure 10: Chart displaying ethnicity of respondents

The most represented ward was New Brighton (13.5%) followed by Wallasey (12.2%) and Greasby, Franky and Irby (10.1%). Eastham (1.1%) and Bidston and St James (1.5%) were the least well represented.

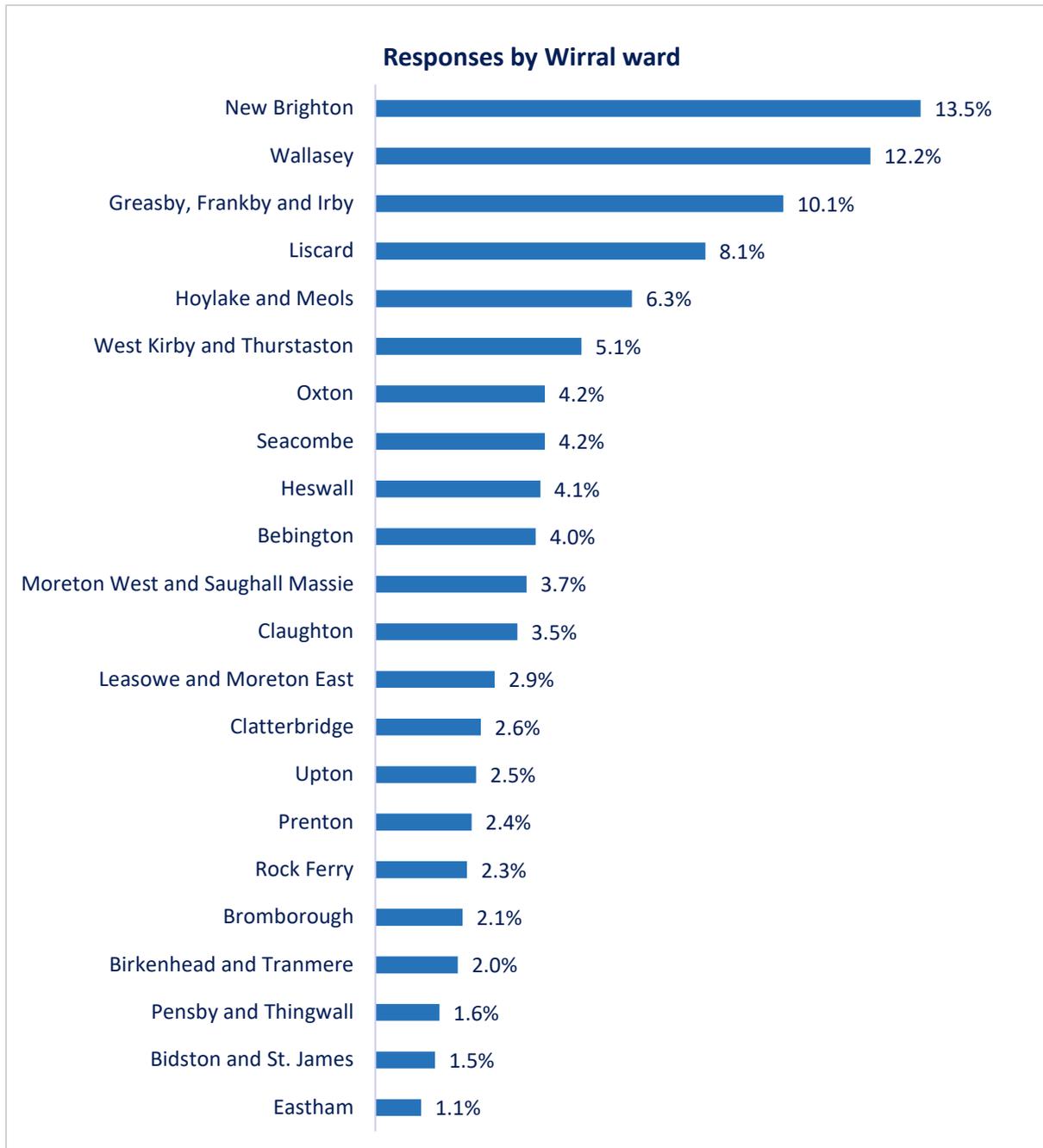


Figure 11: Chart displaying Wirral Ward representation

## 4.2 Have Your Say - Site Traffic

Reviewing the site activity, visits, and how people visit the site can be useful to evaluate if people are aware of the site, as well as to ensure engagement activities are deployed effectively, and to a wide range of different people – enhancing public engagement in the future. 1643 unique visitors viewed the ‘Budget: 2023-24 Library Services’ consultation page of the Have Your Say site. Of these, 864 visited multiple project pages and 105 viewed a photo. 745 people in total completed the questionnaire.

These figures cannot be viewed as definitive as they are based on site tracking through ‘cookies’ and there are a number of factors that can impact on this. These include that cookies may be disabled or deleted, individuals may access the site multiple times through different devices or different browsers. However, the figures can be used to gauge how much interest has been generated in individual projects through the rate of engaged participants.

The route that people access the site is known as the traffic source. The ‘Have your say’ portal allows analysis to be carried out on traffic source, and if they lead to engagement in the site tools such as the questionnaire. This analysis allows a greater understanding of which communication and promotional tools to use to optimise engagement.

For this project a range of traffic sources have been reviewed and summarised in the table below. Most visits to the site were or direct visits where people typed the internet address into their web browser (1,236), followed by links clicked from social media sites (897). It should be noted that Direct visits generated a much higher rate of engagement of 31.5%, meaning 31.5% of these visits resulted in completion of the survey, whereas Social Media visits had an engagement rate of 15.2%.

Traffic Source	Aware Visits	Informed Visits (%)	Engaged Visits (%)
DIRECT	1236	766 (62%)	389 (31.5%)
SOCIAL	897	547 (61%)	136 (15.2%)
EMAIL	200	132 (66%)	54 (27%)
SEARCH ENGINE	213	153 (71.8%)	74 (34.7%)
GOV SITES	145	122 (84.1%)	47 (32.4%)
REFERRALS	121	91 (75.2%)	45 (37.2%)

Table 5: Site traffic sources

# Appendix 1: Direct Representations

## INDIVIDUAL REPRESENTATION 1

I am writing to tell you of my concern for the future of our Wallasey central library. I have been using this library for 50 years and in all that time I have never been disappointed or discouraged by the service and welcome I have received in this lovely building. It's not just a place to borrow a book. It's a place to meet people, to enjoy the ambience of a wonderful place and to learn or find out about everything under the sun.

I feel that the thing that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom is our ability to strive for more than just shelter and food. Obviously they are of supreme importance but to bring everything down to cost is a terrifyingly dangerous road to travel. Those who can afford to contribute to the running of this and other precious places for all, should be encouraged to do so.

Please help us to be proud of and strive to enjoy and thrive in the place where we live.

## INDIVIDUAL REPRESENTATION 2

I was alarmed to read the proposal to close Wallasey and Birkenhead Central library and move the facility into a council building. In my opinion this move would be short sighted and mishandling of public property. A library is a multi communication hub plus a warm place for the lonely and isolated. Not everyone has the luxury of computer facilities or even a warm place to live. As a Wallasey resident we have seen so much of our heritage lost to cuts. To close the Wallasey and Birkenhead central library would be a travesty, another beautiful building lost and a further facility lost to the people of Wallasey. A library space in a Council building is no replacement for a library building. Education and information should be accessible to everyone of all backgrounds , age and means. When I was a teenager living in a crowded home I did my homework in the library. I am sure many youngsters of a similar background would benefit greatly if the facility was more widely promoted. Rather than reducing the service schools and the library service should be telling people what is available. The library is a window into further education, a tool to bring further education to those groups of people who would feel this opportunity is beyond their horizon a chance to level up society. We should be investing not reducing the service.

Personally I am a regular visitor to the library and I saw first hand how the service was disrupted for too long during Covid . Please do use the fallout of Covid and the mishandling of access as an excuse to reduce a valuable service to local residents.

### INDIVIDUAL REPRESENTATION 3

I am a professional genealogist and have regular need to use the local history resources at both Wallasey Central Library and Birkenhead Central Library. In an age when many genealogical and local history datasets are online, these two libraries hold material which is not. Wallasey, for example, holds electoral rolls, local newspapers and tombstone inscriptions, as well as other items of local archive interest, such as corporation minute books. I have used all these sources in the tracing of family histories and house histories, and in reuniting families, and have been filmed for TV doing so. Birkenhead, meanwhile, holds electoral rolls for many of the towns and villages at the north end of the peninsula, amongst other material. I am very concerned that these sources will be lost to public access if these two libraries are closed and I know my concerns are shared by other local historians and researchers, amateurs and professionals alike.

For a number of years, the large national and international genealogy websites have been racing each other to acquire new datasets. The two main providers in the UK are Ancestry and FindMyPast, although there are others. By "acquire", I mean pay local authorities to digitise their material and place it online for general searching. Ancestry, for example, has digitised Liverpool's electoral rolls up to 1970, while FindMyPast runs the British Newspaper Archive, which digitises local newspapers, including the Liverpool Echo & the Mercury. I would suggest that you ask Liverpool Record Office about the process they went through with both firms to have their collections digitised, and how much income it accrued for the local authority. If repeated for Wallasey and Birkenhead, this process should salvage the data held at the two libraries & make it accessible to many more people, and in perpetuity, whilst also bringing in some income.

There are, though, datasets which neither Ancestry nor FindMyPast would digitise, such as the corporation minute books. You might consider relocating these to Wirral Archives - they are local & presumably have enough physical space. This could also be the home for the physical volumes which are digitised, plus the later electoral rolls (e.g. from 1970-2000) which would not be digitised. What is important is to retain public access to all these sources and, whilst it is wonderful to house them in beautiful old buildings, it does seem that the world no longer has money to spend on culture and learning, only on basic day-to-day survival. It is a sad state of affairs - a retrograde step for human society - but it is what it is. You will find less opposition to your proposals to close the libraries if you can guarantee the survival and, most importantly, accessibility of the material elsewhere locally and/or online.