Community managed libraries

Executive Summary

Public libraries have always involved and worked with the community. Now however, community managed libraries are increasingly being looked at as part of the changing future of England's library services. Many local authorities are now attempting to involve the community in an innovative way to assist in both the delivery of the statutory service and to create community managed libraries in areas where a needs assessment supports the withdrawal of the statutory Council service.

The existing evidence suggests that community managed libraries are able to offer:-

- Local authorities: the opportunity to maintain or increase library provision within an area; to achieve reduced cost; with a model that can be applied to urban as well as rural environments; and that can achieve economic and policy objectives around employment, deprivation and community engagement with the political process as well as social benefits.

- Communities: the opportunity for consumers to be included as participants and influencers over their service provision; and to respond to place based needs through co-location, asset transfer and income generation.

- Users: continued access, and in some cases increased or improved access to library services when library buildings would otherwise have closed. They meet the needs of people who want access to information, books and other media, including the internet, and who value the civic space for study, learning, reading or simply meeting others.

Whilst a key part of their attractiveness lies in their ability to meet or proportionately meet the ongoing costs associated with maintaining a library, community managed libraries are not 'free'; a large proportion are maintained through parish or town council support. Moreover a library designed by its core users might not necessarily look the same as one provided by the council. When considering community managed libraries, local authorities must be mindful of their duties under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.

- Community managed libraries that are not part of an area's statutory library provision are not governed by it – which means that they could charge for books and services. This might be seen to undermine the fundamental principles and purpose of the library service, and would not reflect the library service as we know it.

- Too much distance from local authority support would likely reduce a community library's capacity to be used to achieve social change within an area – missing out on a greater strategic opportunity for the local authority.

- The closure of public funded library buildings may lead to the loss of trained and paid staff. Community managed and run libraries may not be able to offer consistent access to the same level of advice and support as the public library service.

- There is a degree of interdependency between statutory and community managed libraries rooted in the fact that community libraries face difficulties if set outside the statutory service, and the statutory service can see benefits to the population as whole if it has a relationship with community managed libraries. The greatest opportunity for both is to work in symbiotic partnership.

The characteristics of success for community managed libraries are: public sector support (local authority or precept based), co-location, enterprise, asset transfer or ownership, specialist staff support and a clear sense of social purpose. With a genuine partnership arrangement with a local authority, opportunities around scale – increasing the number of community managed libraries that target social change, creating economies of scale, and involving more communities in ownership and influence over services – can be achieved. The door is open for local authorities not to simply transfer libraries to community management to save their own money, but to work with communities to transition the process in a thoughtful and strategic manner, to create shared benefits for local government, local community and local user.

1. Introduction

DCMS commissioned the MLA in March 2011 to work with local authorities to explore the different models of community managed libraries both developed and in development in England and to produce a review signposting some of the different approaches possible, and the benefits and issues involved. This document is intended to inform local authorities who are reviewing delivery of their service or thinking about new ways of involving and working with communities.

It is worth noting some things at the outset:

- The evidence base is very small, with 29 existing community managed libraries reviewed forming around one per cent of England's libraries, and 10 large scale transfers anticipated.
- Public library services already achieve many of the benefits discussed within these pages, although it is not the remit of this work to reiterate their worth.
- If local authorities are looking for savings, transferring services to communities will not necessarily produce the economic benefits local authorities need.
- The community management of libraries can deliver some of the wider benefits of social participation but it may also bring about wide varieties in the quality of provision and sustainability is not assured.
- Community involvement and engagement with the statutory library service has been in place for many years; it is different from handing a service over to the community to run and manage.
- The current pace of change means that this is a dynamic context in which to write a paper, aspects of which may quickly be outdated.

The MLA has consulted and worked with a range of authorities[1] to produce this guidance and a more detailed document will follow which will include case studies from those authorities.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this document is to identify the issues and opportunities which face local authorities: those who are seeking to work in new ways with communities to develop and deliver their library service and those who are looking for communities to take over services which the local authority no longer intends to run because they have assessed local needs and consider provision is no longer necessary as part of the public library service.

The community managed models reviewed fall into two broad groups:
- England's existing community supported libraries, set up and sustained over the past decade or longer;
- Very recent (in many cases yet to be launched) plans for multiple community transfers.

This document aims to explore both existing and emerging community managed models, to centralise into one document a) existing models and an analysis of what they show us; and b) planned models. It will consider the potential, constraints, benefits and risks of services managed by communities specifically in application to the current and future delivery of England's libraries.

A longer document will follow which will catalogue and signpost in one place existing guidance, policies, and frameworks created by other organisations and local authorities to avoid replication and centralise reference information. Key amongst these is the Asset Transfer Unit's Support Map, which includes toolkits (including a legal toolkit), business planning and strategy development guidance for community groups considering taking on management of libraries.

---

[1] This includes: Herefordshire, Shropshire, Buckinghamshire, North Yorkshire, Kirklees, Northumberland, the London Boroughs of Hackney and Lewisham, Somerset, Cambridgeshire, Gloucestershire, Dorset, the Isle of Wight, and Suffolk.

Consequently, the core target audience this paper will address is local library authorities in England embarking on their own consideration of future models for maintaining library services within their areas. If this document is successful it will enable such local authorities to navigate through some of the early stages of this process by drawing on the expertise of their colleagues across the country who have faced a similar challenge. It is also hoped that it will prove useful information to community groups considering moving in this direction.

1.2 Defining community managed libraries

There is a good deal of variance between localities around what a community library actually constitutes. This paper does not seek to advocate a definition, but the core commonalities shared by community managed libraries that could be used to define them are:

- More ability to use volunteers innovatively
- More flexibility to meet or proportionately meet the ongoing costs associated with maintaining a library building
- The gradation of some or all of the library consumers from a role of straightforward consumption to a role that includes co-production of the service: whether through the inclusion of consumers or constituents within the governance, whether through direct management and autonomy over the service, or whether through ownership of the service's assets

We have found that the most common trait for community libraries is the use of volunteers. Approaches that produce significant cost savings for local authorities are slightly less common and fewer again can demonstrate active co-production. There is a great deal of flex between the models.

What do community managed libraries look like?
To gain an understanding of the range of variety between the models it will be necessary to reference the case studies referred to in the longer paper to be published later this month. However there have been a number of broadly 'typical' community transfers, including:
- Authorities paying community groups, charities or social enterprises, to deliver statutory services at sites of their own choosing – these are exampled in Hereford's Peterchurch Library[2], Shropshire's Cleobury Mortimer Country Centre and Kirklees' Chestnut Centre Library and Information Centre.
- Communities establishing their own services where the authority is withdrawing funding – exampled historically in Buckinghamshire's Little Chalfont, Chalfont St Giles and West Wycombe, in Northumberland's community libraries, and in Cambridgeshire's Library Access Points.
- Authorities encouraging and working with communities to continue to deliver services where the authority is withdrawing funding – exampled in North Yorkshire's Grassington, Bainbridge and George & Dragon, and in all of the large scale models (see section 3 of this paper).

Where community libraries have the potential to vary the most is around what they offer in relation to the existing library service. This cannot simply be defined as the provision of books. A library is defined by the space it provides for the communities it serves, its bibliographical services (the quality of its stock, its immediacy in relation to its neighbourhood, its variety for different users with different physical needs), by its role in information provision; its digital offering (e.g. broadband speed, access to e-books) and its preparedness to identify and meet on-line trends; and the differing kinds of service provision that a core service needs to offer and spread (including customer service values).

---

[2] The Peterchurch Library is managed by its library service and is funded for its operational costs (community participation only removes some of the costs of staffing) so is to all intents and purposes part of the statutory service - although the Herefordshire Council point out that as Peterchurch does not have public access pc provision, under CILIP definitions it represents an addition to the service.

1.3 Community models now and in the future

This paper draws on 29 examples of library services, representing less than one per cent of the public libraries in England, which have been supported and run by community groups during the last ten years. They represent the evidence base for all the conclusions which this paper draws about the strengths and risks inherent in community run services; this learning should help inform the thinking of local authorities as they plan the future development and delivery of their library service.

This evidence is drawn out at section 2 of this document.

What is happening now however is that, in the context of financial pressures, and also because of the benefits evidenced by the existing community models, local authorities are developing different ideas for the transfer of proportions of their library services to community involvement and management. There are many differing approaches evolving very rapidly and a number of potential issues can be identified from the emerging thinking around multiple community transfers.

This emerging thinking in relation to future, large-scale community library involvement and/or management is drawn out in section 3.

2. Existing evidence: Learning from existing models

Group One references England's existing community supported and managed libraries, set up individually and at grass roots level, and sustained over the past decade or longer; it can provide us with clear evidence about what can be achieved with community libraries which have sustained in different ways in different areas. These include:
- Herefordshire: Peterchurch
- North Yorkshire: The George & Dragon, North Stainley, Grassington, Bainbridge, Hawes
- Buckinghamshire: Little Chalfont, Chalfont St Giles, West Wycombe, Richings Park, Steeple Claydon, Downley
- London Borough of Hackney: Woodberry Down
- Kirklees: The Chestnut Centre Library & Information Centre
- Cambridgeshire: Haddenham, Little Downham, Fulbourn, Bassingbourn, Somersham, Bottisham, Gamlingay, Melbourn, Swavesey and Waterbeach[3]
- Somerset: West Camel and IIchester[4]
- Northumberland: Ellington, Cowpen, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Corbridge, Haydon Bridge, Hadston
- Shropshire: Cleobury Mortimer Country Centre and the Severn Centre, Highley[5]

This section explores the characteristics of these models and the learning they evidence, ending by asking the question: Why transfer to the community? What are the benefits and what are the risks?

2.1 Characteristics of existing models

A common feature of the existing community models has been that they have started without inclusion in the local statutory provision, and the support that the publicly delivered service can provide. The majority of community libraries including those in Buckinghamshire, Somerset, Cambridge and Northumberland have all started as non statutory. However 34% - in North Yorkshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Kirklees, Hackney and Lewisham - began and continued with funding as part of the statutory provision; these have all been reliant on the goodwill and support of the local authority to set up.

Financial independence from the local authority has traditionally therefore been a common characteristic with roughly only a quarter directly funded by local authorities. In 41% of the models the support of the parish council is essential, with 38% of community managed libraries funded by precept support and 21% housed in buildings provided by their parish council. This underlines that community libraries are not free and represent a cost to the public purse.

Several community libraries believe that their volunteers bring the required skills to the service to enable them to develop the capacity to fundraise or create profitable business models, but only seven of the 21 (i.e. 33%) income generating models do both. It is possible that the decision around which function to specialise in is opportunistic, based on the skills most readily available. The majority of parish council funded models (43%) have also developed active fundraising or enterprising functions – which indicates that annual precept financial support is directly linked to community libraries establishing financial models with flourishing mixed economies.

Co-location is a key factor in sustainability and 62% of existing community libraries are co-located. It enables some to be sustained without any funding support or income generation. Most frequently, however, co-location is linked to enterprise or fundraising, with 12 of the 21 (i.e. 57%) income-generating models being co-located with other, external partners. This is contributing to a diverse picture of libraries provided within village halls, pubs, shops, churches, phone boxes, day care centres, tourist information centres, development trusts and social enterprises.

---

[3] Only Haddenham, Little Downham, Bassingbourn, Fulbourn and Somersham are included in the sample
[4] Only Ilchester is included within the sample; awaiting information on West Camel
[5] Only the Cleobury Country Centre is including within the sample

The financial savings which come from the volunteer model are understandably significant, given that they do not pay for professional staff. Whilst Hackney's Woodberry Down does not include corporate overheads, the library is open for roughly four-fifths of the proportion of other libraries but at less than a quarter of their costs.

It is possible to be entirely self-sustaining. Buckinghamshire's West Wycombe and Richings Park models show that these organisations can survive at local level with no support from the local authority at all whilst paying a full market and fully repairing lease along with annual charges for accessing the Library Management System (LMS) and book stock. Both models are small and have survived with all ongoing costs met by a mix of philanthropy and enterprise.

The ownership of assets has not traditionally been a part of the transfer agreements for existing community libraries but it is starting to play a key role in the development of sustainable community libraries, with at least four community libraries held in their own buildings, two of which have been transferred from the local authority (Northumberland), or built on sites transferred by the local authority (Kirklees) and on a case by case basis several more community libraries have paid full market rent for their buildings (in North Yorkshire, Buckinghamshire, Lewisham). This may well play a significant part in the future capitalisation of library services.

The majority (86%) of community libraries are not staffed by professional librarians or library service staff, with volunteers taking on the roles not only of frontline staff but also of managing events and activities, stock development and rotation, and premises and budget management. Exceptions to this are Peterchurch, Cleobury, Grassington and Steeple Claydon. A large proportion (33%) of the libraries have kept staff costs to a minimum by utilising professional staff in an advisory, peripatetic and development capacity – this will increase significantly shortly with Buckinghamshire's and Northumberland's community libraries returning to statutory provision. It has proved to be a challenge for some how to manage staff resource to ensure professional and specialist support whilst retaining one of the core attractive elements of the community library, its cost effectiveness.

Of the libraries reviewed, only three (11%) operated in urban or deprived areas – Hackney's Woodberry Down, Kirklees' Chestnut Centre, and Lewisham's Pepys Resource Centre – but, given the prevalent association of community managed libraries with affluent and rural areas, these do suggest that community managed approaches, like directly delivered ones, can both operate and achieve social benefits in urban areas. There are clear differences in applying the model to urban environments, with issues around capacity, culture and support infrastructure[6]. However each of the urban models has resulted in economic benefits in areas of deprivation. Woodberry Down in Hackney has returned 30 people into employment over a three-year period, of which about a third were long-term unemployed and one was third-generation unemployed. Equally the Chestnut Centre in Huddersfield is managed by a community enterprise that aims to get the long-term unemployed into permanent employment, increase enterprise and investment and drive wages into a deprived estate. Ecocom's Pepys Resource Centre model uses volunteers and paid staff to recycle computers and develop workforce IT skills in the young.

2.2 Demonstrable strengths evidenced by existing community libraries:

The case studies have identified that transferring management and control of library services to communities can:

- Maintain or increase numbers of libraries in some areas: North Yorkshire, Herefordshire, Hackney, Kirklees and Lewisham have all increased their library provision this way

---

[6] Capacity: urban areas tend to be characterised by population density, including a higher proportion of low income and unskilled constituents, those on incapacity benefit or with poor health, whereas rural areas although often deprived, often also include a higher level of ABC1 retirement households, offering those with the capacities and resources to get involved. Culture: in discussing this issue Northumberland pointed to many urban areas having a more paternalistic approach and being used to public services simply being provided, where rural areas have been less used to having all their facilities delivered, have developed a community put-together approach, (e.g. school with youth hostel, a pub with a library). Infrastructure: rural areas benefit from long established parish councils who have histories of being active to effect, where town councils are very new (in operation since 2009) in urban areas and have been less quick to understand what the opportunities are; some urban areas don't have Town Councils, only city councils, which may have a different political flavour.

- Ensure continued access to collections and services for local people: the majority of community libraries would have been closed unless they developed their community management model.

- Provide better access to some services: community models have generally increased users, increased issues, increased access (opening hours). In addition some can demonstrate that they have increased their book stock through donations, and some extend the library activities traditionally provided by their service.

- Achieve social and community benefits: Existing community libraries have achieved something over and above keeping the library open within their areas, offering new activities and social events, engaging their local communities and often exampling a beneficial effect on community cohesion.

- Include consumers within library governance: Different community managed libraries have involved service users in different ways and with different results; the evidence shows these libraries starting to enact Big Society concepts and outcomes.

- Apply to urban as well as rural areas: 11% of community libraries are based in urban areas and have created successful models and this figure is set to increase with further models planned in Hackney, Northumberland, Buckinghamshire and Lewisham.

- Bring economic as well as social benefits: Economic benefits are linked directly to urban models, which have demonstrated the capacity to train the unskilled, return long term unemployed to work, drive wages and investment into deprived areas. Cleobury Country Centre shows that economic benefits need not be linked only to urban models.

- Increase specialist library activities or the development of more varied services: Volunteers can bring different capacities into the library model, enabling them to increase the range of products they offer – including English Spoken as a Second Language sessions or homework clubs.

- Reduce costs: 72.5% of community libraries are provided at no direct cost to the local authority.

- Generate income: The majority of community libraries are able to meet or partially meet the costs of their buildings and utilities through income generation. Community models demonstrate a significant capacity for enterprise and innovation, developing social businesses that support the library provision. They also demonstrate a greater capacity and ability to fundraise. Many achieve greater efficiencies through co-location partnerships. Some (although few) are entirely self-sustaining, without any public funding (local authority or precept) or co-location support at all.

- Community libraries can be strategic and opportunistic rather than simply reactionary: The evidence suggests that there is no direct link between the threat of closure and the ability to succeed: Herefordshire, Shropshire, North Yorkshire, Kirklees, Lewisham and to some extent Hackney all demonstrate that new libraries can open with community support built into their operational model.

2.3 The challenges evidenced by transfer of libraries to communities:

There are only 29 existing community supported libraries reviewed within the sample for this report. This limited evidence base inevitably limits our knowledge of the impacts of the community library model. However, the following challenges and issues have been identified:

- Duplication: of effort in rural areas with volunteers running libraries after local authorities cease to and local authorities providing a mobile service to meet their obligations under the 1964 Act

- Specialist services: With the full withdrawal of local authority participation there is a risk of reduction in quality services particularly around the information/knowledge agenda because of the withdrawal of specialist librarians.

- **Increased cost to the taxpayer:** 38% of community libraries are funded via the parish precept - and this is set to increase with the large-scale transfers – this is in addition to the funding the public provide for the statutory service via their council tax. There is also nothing to stop a non-statutory community library from introducing charges.

- **Ability to fundraise:** Libraries do not use fundraising more than enterprise as a means of income generation. This could be due to a range of factors, including the experience or abilities of volunteers, the local market, or the challenges of regional/national competition around grant funding – but it may indicate that this is less easy than many consider and that sole reliance on philanthropy may represent a short-termist approach to sustainability for community libraries.

As well as these issues, community groups taking on a local library face a myriad of issues of their own. Chief among these are: all legal risks (around data protection, health and safety, TUPE) will transfer to the community management on the day of transfer and the community management needs to be capable of dealing with these organisational management issues as well as the day to day delivery of a service; and the need to find and train volunteers or staff to provide the service. Both are cited by many as a steep learning curve. This is where transferring to existing social enterprises can be helpful; at Hawes, the Pepys Resource Centre, Cleobury Mortimer Community Centre and the Chestnut Centre in Kirklees the operators were already equipped with this experience.

2.4 What makes a successful community model?

Success depends on a number of inter-related issues and is, not unexpectedly, highly dependent on local relationships, local planning and local engagement. Many of the strengths evidenced by community libraries are also evidenced by publicly delivered libraries, which fall outside the scope of this report.

That said, the evidence base provided by the existing community libraries across England indicates that the strengths of the community model could be captured in any local area, with the right combination of attributes for the local market. It is impossible to provide a direct assessment of what elements need to be in place for a community library to be considered feasible, partly because the models are fairly differentiated, local markets are themselves nuanced and partly because views on what constitutes 'feasible' for community libraries varies from place to place. However, an untested framework developed from the existing evidence suggests that one or preferably more elements need to be in place from each line on the grid.

Finance & in-kind support	Local authority one off grants or infrastructure investment	Local authority dowry, investment or endowment	Parish / town council precept income	Commissioning income or 'rent' paid for library space	Freedom for enterprise (including consumer facing charges)	Philanthropic opportunity in local market
Assets & resources (non specialist)	Utilities payments / contributions	Building maintenance contract continued	Peppercorn / below market rent	Asset transfer of leasehold or freehold	Co-location opportunities brokered	Governance, management & leadership support
Specialist & bibliographic services	Provision of book stock as gifted transfer	IT connectivity, wifi, People's Network, RFID investment	LMS, book stock management and specialist peripatetic support staff	Training packages for volunteers or community staff	Restructures, TUPE indemnification, legal support	Ongoing strategic support from remaining within statutory provision

The common characteristics of success for community libraries include: public sector (precept or local authority) support, co-location, enterprise, asset transfer or ownership, specialist staff support, and a clear sense of social purpose. For urban models to succeed, they tend to require *all* of these elements in place, alongside a genuine partnership relationship with the local authority.

3. Multiple transfers: emerging thinking and practice

We have explored the narrative of thinking and emerging practice from local authorities who are considering handing multiple libraries to community management or working more closely with the community to help maintain their statutory service - as an alternative to simply closing services.

In many cases these proposals are still involved in ongoing community consultations and are expected to evolve. Again there are commonalities and differences inherent in each of their models. It is, however, difficult to give exact proportions given the number of uncertainties around some of the models. This section explores the characteristics of these models.

Over ten local authorities were interviewed who were considering a larger scale rollout of their community model: Hackney, Buckinghamshire, Northumberland, Cambridge, Isle of Wight, Dorset, Somerset, Lewisham, Gloucestershire and Suffolk. Summaries of their approaches are charted below.

Area	Notes	Total Libraries 2010	Proposed numbers of community-run	% libraries community-run 2011/2012
Hackney	Considering concentrating the majority of its resources in 3 main libraries, offering greater opening hours and a greater range of activities; moving remaining 5 libraries into community based models that will continue (unlike Woodberry Down) to retain some professional staff alongside incorporating volunteers. All will remain statutory.	8	5	62.5%
Buckinghamshire	Anticipating transferring 14 of its mid-sized libraries (the largest operates at an annual turnover of £115k) to community management and reducing funding across all 14 by 50%. All will remain statutory.	29	14	48%
Northumberland	In addition to an existing 6 community libraries working to assist the transfer of 4-5 more libraries to community management., out of a service of 34. All will remain statutory.	34	10	29%
Cambridgeshire	In addition to 10 existing non statutory community libraries it is consulting on the possible transfer of a further 13 out of 32 to community partnered, which will remain statutory	32	13	41%
Isle of Wight	Considering transferring 5 of its 11 libraries into community management. None of the community libraries will remain statutory.	11	5	45%
Dorset	Consulting on proposal to transfer 10-20 out of 34 libraries to community management. None of the community libraries will remain statutory.	34	10-20	29-59%
Somerset	Transferring 15 out of 34 libraries to community management. Some will remain statutory, others won't. 4 Community libraries will receive council funding, 11 will have funding met entirely by their communities.	34	15	44%
Lewisham	Transferring 5 of 12 libraries to community provision but also gaining 3 new community libraries. All will remain statutory.	12 (15)	5 (+3)	41% (53%)
Suffolk	Consulting on proposal to transfer all 44 libraries to community management, with 15 continuing to receive commissioned funding as County Libraries, and 29 ceasing funding; all will remain statutory.[7]	44	44 (or 29)	100% (or 66%)
Totals		237 (240)	121-131	51-55%

---

[7] Working with community groups to help them develop a business case to take on libraries which might be part of the statutory service, and working on a CIC or trust to provide support for all, and management of libraries which are not divested

3.1 Characteristics of multiple transfers

The majority of local authorities intend to retain their community libraries within their statutory service, although very few intend to continue funding these libraries. Only three[8] intend to retain ongoing (albeit significantly reduced) funding packages but several are using asset transfer (of leaseholds) as a way of providing the libraries with the means to sustain themselves. Lewisham is providing the greatest level of financial investment with start-up packages provided to each of its community libraries as one-off investments in their capital infrastructure, including technology and RFIDs - although Somerset will provide one-off low level grants to its community run libraries, as do the Isle of Wight.

Most local authorities seem to be seeking to retain influence in the transferred community libraries partly to maintain or monitor quality, even of those libraries excluded by their local authorities from the statutory service. This influence is usually achieved through the retention of a stake in the business – the provision of books, IT infrastructure, and a basic Library Management System (LMS)[9], although some will use their continued ownership of the capital infrastructure (the buildings) to retain influence through a contractual agreement.

Relatively few local authorities anticipated providing ongoing free access to staff to their community libraries – this is an area of provision that they have either decided not to provide for non-statutory organisations (Dorset) or that they intend to charge for (Somerset, Cambridgeshire). Several have considered providing charged volunteer training packages (Somerset, Suffolk). Exceptions are the Isle of Wight, which has developed a free and comprehensive volunteer training package that includes third sector organisational management training as well as specialist library training, and Lewisham, which anticipates providing ongoing volunteer training and peripatetic staff support free of charge as part of its intangible library service model.

Several cited that their community groups were going to need specialist legal advice or support around the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (or TUPE), indemnifications, restructuring pre-transfer, and business management. Only the Isle of Wight was explicit about including this in its volunteer training package. This means that community groups would be responsible for sourcing advice and experience themselves.

A greater proportion are anticipating capitalising their community libraries through the transfer of capital assets, with Dorset, Lewisham, Suffolk, Northumberland and Somerset either having transferred or considering the transfer of assets to community groups. European Union (EU) procurement regulations can represent a barrier here and one of the main reasons for the involvement of parish and town councils in community libraries is their exemption, as an elected body, from procurement regulations. This is particularly an issue for large scale transfers or commissioned models such as Suffolk, where private business will have a more considerable interest in services.

Local authorities have particularly focused on the perceived potential of libraries to attract philanthropic income, and all authorities consulted seemed happy with the prospect of their community libraries fundraising. It is less easy to judge how challenging a prospect this is in a market where so many community libraries will be unleashed at once, and where some community libraries have struggled.

The ability to develop enterprise models and capitalise on assets will be especially important to those community managed libraries that will have no local authority funding, many of whom are outside of statutory provision and therefore are not constrained in law. Annual membership fees (excluding children) have been considered by Somerset and Dorset. Somerset is considering introducing a proactive campaign to seek voluntary donations. Its community consultation found that challenges were made by constituents to one of the central tenets of the library service (reflected in the 1964 Act) that books be loaned for free – when in similar free services (such as NHS prescriptions) individual and private rather than communal use incurred a charge. Users suggested that they would prefer to pay a

---

[8] Buckinghamshire, Northumberland and Dorset - and Suffolk's County Libraries (not its Community Libraries)

charge or donate money to the council to support their libraries – which would provide them with a reassurance not provided by tax increases, that the money would be ring-fenced specifically for the library service.   Clearly this would only apply to non statutory services as the legislation does not allow charging for book borrowing in libraries which fall within the public library service.

The possibility of community managed libraries starting to charge for services is one of the reasons generally given for maintaining free mobile provision; to date however none of the community owned and managed services have levied charges. This question over charging will continue to be pertinent in any area where community libraries are not part of the statutory provision.

Generally there appears to be little strategic consideration at local authority level about how the community model can be used to drive investment, social and economic change within areas of deprivation, possibly because of a lack of understanding around how to go about it or conviction as to its likely success. Exceptions to this include Northumberland, Lewisham, Somerset and Buckinghamshire where local authorities are considering how they can best facilitate community transfers in deprived areas. In Northumberland the council is engaging with the local development trust in Lynemouth to manage the library, located within a deprived urban area, which is envisaged to *only* use volunteers in need of reskilling and support into employment – attempting to scale up Hackney's economic benefits.

Lewisham is perhaps developing the most sophisticated approach to enabling large scale transfers to the community within a deprived, urban borough. It has defined its library service as holding a value that is intangible, could be realised in any location and is not inherent in the service buildings. It has put to competitive tender the transfer of five of its libraries[10] to community anchor groups including community charities, social enterprises and the private sector, with transfer envisaged on May 29th 2011. A central tenet of Lewisham's approach is that the community groups managing the buildings are expected to generate sufficient income to sustain the cost of maintaining the building and their businesses. Fundraising could form part of the mix but it is expected that enterprises will generate the bulk of income.

3.2 Strengths of the projected multiple transfers to the community

There is no reason to automatically assume that the transfer of large proportions of libraries to the community could not achieve all the benefits identified by the Group One models at 2.2. In particular, Lewisham seems to be in the process of achieving what Hackney and North Yorkshire have – the growth of the library service through community transfer. Whilst it is difficult to assess strengths of models that are still evolving, there are also some interesting potential *additional* strengths evidenced by multiple models that are worth noting here.

- Retention of service infrastructure: instead of simply closing services, libraries will still be open and can be invested in at a later date.

- Economies of scale: with scaled-up transfers. Local authorities have started to explore whether there is an opportunity for community libraries to achieve economies of scale by creating new legal vehicles and governance models[11] to capitalise on National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) and exploit assets more fully.

- Social change: There is a potential opportunity in some models for the local authority, by relinquishing day to day building or service management and assuming a strategic partnership role, to achieve greater strategic and policy outcomes in specific areas. Northumberland's Lynemouth and Lewisham's transfers are designed with this in mind, and Suffolk's place-based approach reflects an attempt to deliver around much bigger strategic outcomes than library service alone.

- Scale: The starting point for the majority of councils in moving a body of libraries to

---

[10] At Blackheath, Crofton Park, Grove Park, New Cross and Sydenham
[11] For existing MLA guidance see http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/support/toolkits/Devolved_governance_for%20museums_libraries_and_archives

community delivery is to understand which libraries generated the lowest user levels and least successful comprehensive reach within their demographic – a decision that invariably sees the smallest libraries within a service moving to community delivery. However there are a few councils – Buckinghamshire, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire – that, because of other factors in their analysis, are transferring larger, high performing libraries (the largest has an operating turnover of £115k) to community delivery. If these are successful, the benefits may also scale up.

3.3 Challenges and issues inherent in multiple transfers

It is difficult to draw out any additional challenges inherent in the multiple transfer models because so many of them are still in formation and are tailoring or adapting their approaches following different stages of their community consultations. However the following issues are emerging:

- Replication of issues: as currently envisaged, many models will replicate the issues identified by the Group One models at 2.3; that is - all the authorities that are dropping community libraries from their statutory provision plan to duplicate community services with mobiles; the majority are not planning to provide free ongoing access to specialist staff support; there will be an increased cost to the taxpayer as there is a great expectation around town and parish councils providing increased precept support; there is an optimism around the largely untested ability of libraries to fundraise.

- Scale of the change: Often the starting point for councils in moving a body of libraries to community managed delivery is to understand which libraries generated the lowest user levels and least successful comprehensive reach within their demographic. Whilst this is a pragmatic approach, taken in the round nationally this has seen between 29% and 100% of reduction in direct delivery – a mean average of 51-55% of services interviewed being transferred to the community. Although a number of councils have decided to retain their community libraries within their statutory provision (an acknowledgement of their overall responsibility for quality and success of the community organisations) they will need to think through very carefully the effect of large scale changes, especially in rural communities.

- Localism: Basing the primary criteria for transfer on user levels – as many councils have - inevitably removes the smallest libraries from the service, irrespective of the value in which they are held or the quality or importance of the function they perform in their local markets.

- Timeframe: The timeframe for so many multiple community transfers is extremely rapid and this is particularly risky for those counties that are transferring the largest proportions of their service, for whom there will be challenges in getting the relationships, co-locations, asset transfers, community and parish support together in the time available.

- Reduced access for the public to the professional advice and support which is offered by professional librarians: this can only be guaranteed in statutory service.

- The statute(s): All changes must enable a local authority to comply with the 1964 Act. A number of the authorities interviewed are currently subject to judicial review and given the variety of the approaches developed by different authorities case law may indicate that not all approaches comply. TUPE, EU Procurement regulations and other statutes also create challenges.

- Sustainability: Although philanthropy plays a key investment role, the majority utilise enterprise to sustain themselves financially. If too many constraints are placed on community models by authorities they risk compromising some of the traits that make them most attractive: their market responsiveness, flexibility, and the influence of the community on production. Community managed models rely on there being volunteers available with the skills and time to manage and run the service; it remains to be seen whether this is sustainable in the long term.

- Growth of the community library model in all areas at the expense of the directly delivered network: the majority of authorities interviewed anticipated community libraries making up over 41% of their network.

4. Summary

Many local authorities have, for some time, been looking at new ways of delivering their services, resulting, in part, in the 35-odd community managed libraries currently in existence. However, to find more cost effective and efficient approaches to service delivery more local authorities are now considering how they might encourage community managed and supported libraries to provide a local library service at reduced cost to their budgets and whether such approaches represent a more sustainable future for their libraries. Inevitably this driver affects smaller libraries in rural areas, which can demonstrate less usage than urban areas despite their inherent social value, and a large proportion of the existing community managed libraries explored by this paper are small local libraries in relatively isolated rural communities.

At the same time the emergence of the Big Society model, which advocates for effective involvement in public services by groups of stakeholding constituents, has in some areas helped to drive debate around whether community supported and managed libraries represent a means of achieving wider social change and benefits. This has driven a number of authorities to think strategically about how community managed libraries could achieve strategic policy objectives, most particularly in rural and urban areas of deprivation and disadvantage. 11% of the existing community managed and supported libraries (and a considerably greater number of those proposed) have been developed by local authorities in active partnership with community groups to achieve long-term strategic policy objectives around employment, deprivation, and community engagement with the political process.

But standards of delivery of a public library service are not only set by local authorities and users – they are set in law by the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act which governs the statutory obligations of library authorities to ensure their overall service is comprehensive, efficient, and freely available for its users. This has led to a nation-wide variance from area to area around whether community libraries are part of the statutory provision or not.

There are a number of issues related to transferring community libraries outside of statutory provision:

- A library set free to design its service around the core needs of its local users would not necessarily look the same as a library service that is designed to meet the needs of the wider area and a local authority's policy or strategic ambitions for its area. Equally a library that lowers its costs to the tax payer does not only have to do this through establishing efficiencies – a blend of consumer, business and commissioned charges can be developed – some of which the 1964 Act expressly prohibits.

- Although there is no direct link between success for community managed libraries and remaining within statutory provision, local authorities who are ceasing all funding to community libraries because of budget difficulties are likely, because of the financial and time pressures they are under, to miss out on a greater strategic opportunity to work with others to achieve service improvement in the context of social change. It is worth noting that both Buckinghamshire and Northumberland, have learned from the success of their existing community models to develop a more partnership-based approach to enable the achievement of long term social as well as short term financial benefits.

Acknowledgement must be given to the fact that what all the Group Two authorities are attempting is a usually fairly brave attempt to ensure the facilities are retained in areas where they would simply be closed. The alternative, the cost of inaction, is closure or salami slicing – both of which have been evidenced elsewhere - and which can be more destructive.

There is the possibility of legal action for any local authority considering a change to delivery of public services. Several of the local authorities considering multiple transfers (irrespective of whether they propose to include or exclude their community libraries from statutory provision) are now subject to threatened judicial review actions.

The statutory service in virtually every case provides the core expertise and resources of the business: gifting or rotating the book stock and IT infrastructure; determining consumer expectations around how a library should look and what it should achieve; providing quality and professionalism; and providing strategic input outside of the local community. Consequently the successful transfer of libraries to community support relies at present on the continued existence of a free, quality statutory service.

The greatest opportunity for the future relationship between directly delivered libraries and community supported libraries is to work in symbiotic partnership. There are some other clear opportunities that could be better exploited, and indeed several of the emerging models are already attempting to respond to these challenges:-

- There is no reason why economic benefits – or social change models – could not be achieved or applied to rural as well as urban areas.

- New social models or legal formats could be developed to create economies of scale for community libraries in areas where co-location, asset transfer or precept support prospects are weak.

- More thinking could be applied to involving communities in management and ownership through different forms of governance – such as community shareholding or other 'democratic' governance structures.

Perhaps most of all, because the threat of closure is only one of a number of catalysts or drivers identified for this process to succeed, the threat of closure is not essential. The benefits (and issues) inherent in community management and support of libraries are clear from the evidence; the door is open for local authorities not simply to transfer libraries to community management to ensure efficiencies, but to work with communities to transition the process in a thoughtful and strategic manner to create shared benefits for local government, but also local community, and local user.

Jo Woolley
MLA
June 2011

Leading strategically, we promote best practice in museums, libraries and archives to inspire innovative, integrated and sustainable services for all.

Museums Libraries and Archives Council
Grosvenor House
14 Bennetts Hill
Birmingham B2 5RS

www.mla.gov.uk
info@mla.gov.uk