Community libraries

Learning from experience: Summary briefing for local authorities

January 2013

This briefing presents the key findings of new research about the different ways in which communities are now involved with their local libraries. It shares recent experiences to assist decision-makers in local authorities as they consider how best to design and manage their own library services.

The research has focused on the different ways in which communities are now involved in supporting or managing core library services in a substantial way. When we use the term 'community involvement' we are using it broadly to include individual volunteers, community and voluntary sector organisations, local social enterprises and parish and town councils.

All of the findings in this briefing are drawn from research undertaken by Locality on behalf of Arts Council England in the summer of 2012. The research included a national mapping of community supported and managed libraries, ten in-depth case studies and a number of interviews.

Two full reports are available:

Community libraries: learning from experience: guiding principles for local authorities

Community Libraries: Ten case studies

A - An overview: the national picture

- the involvement of community groups and volunteers in library services is not new and has been a feature of most library services for decades. CIPFA's survey of public libraries for 2010/11 found over 21,000 volunteers involved in England's 3,300 public libraries

- since 2010, there has been a rapidly growing trend to involve communities in library service delivery in more significant ways – to support and in some places to manage them or even take on ownership and management of library buildings. More than one in three library authorities now have at least one community supported or managed library operating within their area, including some in every region of England and in authorities run by all of the main political parties, as well as in urban and rural areas. In quite a number of these areas there are multiple community libraries

- we found over 170 community supported or managed libraries presently in operation, representing approximately five per cent of all public libraries in England. Most have come into operation in 2011 or 2012

- many library authorities have plans for further such libraries in the next few years. The total number of community supported and managed libraries which are either already operating or planned is presently over 425, which is approximately 12 per cent of all public libraries in England. Given that some Authorities are still reviewing their library services, this number is likely to increase

Emerging approaches

- the libraries that are becoming community supported or managed tend to be the smaller libraries in many areas and, as such, they represent a smaller proportion of overall national book lending and borrowers than their numbers may suggest

- currently, the vast majority of community libraries retain links with their local authority library service and indeed many remain part of the statutory library service

- approximately one in six of the current and planned community supported or managed libraries involve the discounted transfer of assets to the community (either the freehold or a lease of 20 years or more)

- there is an immense variation in practice on the ground. No two library authorities have followed exactly the same approach, so there is a broad spectrum in the nature of activities. Authorities also often use more than one model, accepting that even within one area, 'one size does not fit all'. The present situation is also dynamic, so may well change over time

- we have developed a simple typology to describe the different approaches to involving communities in supporting or managing libraries:

Figure 1:
Types of community library

Type of model:	Our case study examples
1) Independent community library These have no public sector involvement	
1a) Asset owning Independent community library, owns its own premises, sometimes after asset transfer from local authority	Grappenhall Library, Warrington
1b) Non-asset owning Independent community library, with no long term lease or freehold on its premises	Primrose Hill Library, Camden
2) Co-produced library These are partnership models with both public sector and community involvement	
2a) Community managed These are community-led and largely community delivered, rarely with paid staff, but often with some form of ongoing Council support and often still part of the public library network	Buckinghamshire Bradford North Yorkshire
2b) Community supported These are council-led and funded, usually with paid professional staff, but given significant support by volunteers	Lincolnshire Telford and Wrekin Northamptonshire
2c) Commissioned community These are commissioned and fully funded by the council but delivered by a not-for-private-profit community, social enterprise or mutual organisation, either existing or newly created. Councils might commission i) individual libraries or ii) the whole library service	Croxteth Library, Liverpool Suffolk

- not all approaches are equally common. Independent community libraries are rare, accounting for only five per cent of community libraries. Community supported and community managed libraries account for 40 per cent each, and commissioned libraries account for 15 per cent

B – Summaries of case studies

The main report includes summaries of each of our ten case studies, newly researched in 2012 and selected to illustrate the range of practice across England in a mix of urban and rural contexts. The full case studies are also available in a separate companion report.

C - Strategic questions

Library authorities have a strategic choice to make about whether to embrace more significant community involvement in their library service, and if so, what that might look like. Many library authorities have recognised the value of communities being more involved in the provision of local libraries and have worked constructively with their staff and with local communities to see what is possible.

- every library authority should have a positive vision for, and a clear statement of, its public library service. This should be based on an assessment of local need, within available resources, and reflect a rounded vision of the whole library service. Councils also have a legal obligation to have due regard to equalities in the way that the service is being delivered (both currently and in the future) to ensure that there is no adverse impact or barriers to usage for groups protected under the Equality Act 2010.

- the role of communities within the library service should be considered within this strategic and long term framework. Community involvement is not a 'quick fix', it benefits from staged development, training and investment. For more substantial community involvement, local authorities and communities both need time and resources to work out how best they can work together and manage the transition to new arrangements

- all public libraries form part of a wider network. The same is true of most community libraries – very few are fully independent, or want to operate in isolation. In considering how communities might be involved in a library service, it is usually best to consider the service as a whole and from a strategic perspective

- distinguishing between a service and the building it operates within can be important in clarifying what sorts of changes, if any, need to be made to a library service. It may be possible to deliver the same service from a different and more appropriate building or location. The local community may be as attached to the heritage and social value of the building as they are to the library service. Decisions about both services and the buildings they operate from need to be taken within the context of relevant strategic frameworks

- it is possible that community libraries – perhaps in many different shapes and sizes – could evolve to form a valuable part of 21st century public library services in England. But, if that is the case, then further changes, including diversification and enterprise, may also be needed. Strategic planning for future stages will be essential

D - Principles

- **community libraries can form part of a local authority's network of libraries through which it fulfils its statutory duties.**

- **there is no single model of community involvement in libraries.** Locally appropriate solutions usually work best (although some principles apply everywhere)

- **most community libraries are not independent.** Local authorities and their communities can work together in partnership, bringing the best of each other together, to deliver new kinds of services

- **community libraries are testing new approaches to library service delivery.** Even with reduced funding it may be possible to deliver a service differently. Every library service must have a strategic vision for the future and should be supported to deliver a high quality service

- **communities often want to be involved in their libraries (but not always).** Community interest cannot be assumed, but needs to be assessed. We should not underestimate the levels of interest, and capacity, for local communities to support their local libraries. However, communities differ and some, particularly in more disadvantaged areas, may be less able to do this and may need support. There may well be local community trusts or social enterprises which have the capacity to deliver

- **community libraries are often more than 'just volunteers'.** There continues to be a need for paid professional library staff working in every library authority area, and professional staff and their representatives need to be fully consulted on any proposed changes to services. Community managed libraries can be professionally run, usually involve unpaid volunteers and paid professionals working closely together and a number employ their own paid professional staff. Commissioned community libraries also represent a rather different strand of activity – they can provide a funded and professional library service, but outsourced and managed by not-for-private-profit organisations

- **library buildings and assets can be transferred into community ownership.** Some library buildings are now being transferred into the ownership of the local community to provide a firmer foundation for their future

E – Learning points for implementation

This section sets some key factors to consider when seeking whether and/or how to involve communities in libraries.

Stage 1: Developing your strategy

What roles could the community play in your library service?

Any community role in the library service should be set out within the overall strategy, with clear aims.

How can the council collaborate with the community in developing plans to reshape library services?

Most library authorities who have supported the establishment of community libraries in their areas have engaged in early discussions with the community. A collaborative process allows better informed decision-making and reduces misunderstandings. Discussions usually then lead on to the preparation of business plans, to test the practical reality of what is being proposed, and to identify issues that need to be resolved.

How can enterprise and income generation be promoted within the library service?

As part of the reshaping of library services, there is a challenge to not only reduce running costs but to rethink how those services can be provided in ways that are more joined up with other services and rendered financially sustainable for the long-term. Enterprise is an increasingly important ingredient in achieving library service outcomes, and can be actively promoted within library strategies.

When is Community Asset Transfer likely to be appropriate?

Transferring the freehold or a longer lease (20 years or more) of library buildings into the ownership of legally constituted community groups can open up new possibilities for those groups and also result in improvements to the fabric and layout of the buildings. Plans for asset rationalisation and plans for service transformation need to be co-ordinated and synchronised. If it is not appropriate to transfer a building into community ownership at the outset of a community library's life, it may be appropriate at a later stage of development. It is important to note that the transfer of ownership of a building is not the same process as the procurement of a public service, and is provided for differently in legal terms.

Stage 2: Managing change

How can we engage and involve local people?

Change processes require officers and members to work together, they require leadership from council members, and they require meaningful consultation and discussion with both library staff and with the public. Councils will need to consult fully with library staff and their representatives on the nature of any proposed community involvement and how this affects existing staff and their roles, the kinds of skills they will need and their working relationship with the community. Community involvement is about delivering services differently.

Are library assets and services affected by the new Community Rights?

The Localism Act 2012 has given new powers to local communities. The **Community Right to Bid** enables local communities to nominate properties which they believe are 'assets of community value'. Library assets fall within the scope of the definition of an 'asset of community value'. The **Community Right to Challenge** enables local communities to formally express interest in taking over the running of a particular local service where they believe they could do so effectively. Library services fall within the range of services to which this new Right applies.

Stage 3: Commissioning

How can we commission a community library effectively?

Few community libraries are fully independent. So, where it is planned that a community library should continue to be supported by the library authority in some way, and remain part of the network, establishing a clear set of expectations on both sides is good practice.

How can we support and manage volunteers effectively?

In setting up a community library, most have found it necessary to think through what roles volunteers will be expected to undertake, how they can be appropriately recruited and how they can be prepared for these roles. Roles can vary from management and governance roles to cleaning and supporting IT. Many councils who have developed a partnerships with communities have also structured the professional support that they provide to reflect the new approach.

How can we enable a community library to be part of the local network?

Most community libraries are part of the local public library network in some way and many are considered part of the statutory library provision. Most authorities have found ways to ensure that community libraries can remain part of their network, often including the library management system.

Looking to the future

Many community libraries are only in their first year of development. Future implications include:

- establishing a new community library is not the same as running a community library. As services develop, new skills may be required

- services need to be financially sustainable in the longer term. Both library authorities and communities will need to be enterprising and open to the diversification of income streams if these libraries are to thrive into the future. Where councils have provided transitional funding to new community libraries, careful thought will need to be given to how these libraries will be able to establish themselves as sustainable organisations into the future

- low-income communities may require a different approach. There may be a case for additional support where low-income communities are concerned, if community libraries are to become established throughout the country in the long-term

- the phenomenon of community libraries in England is in its infancy today. A stronger network of community groups and local authorities involved in establishing community libraries is needed to promote the exchange of know-how, facilitate study visits and help to generate new ideas. Further research will also be beneficial in helping us to understand how the different approaches are working out in practice

F - Further support

Arts Council England

Further information on the work of Arts Council England can be found at:
www.artscouncil.org.uk

Local Government Association

A wide range of information and advice for local government can be found at:
www.local.gov.uk

Locality

Locality is the UK's leading network of community enterprise practitioners. Locality assists people to work together to build stronger communities – giving hands-on support and promoting peer-to-peer exchange. It is the UK expert on asset transfer and runs the Community Rights advice service. Find out more about Locality:
locality.org.uk/

My Community Rights

Locality provides information and advice on how to exercise the new Community Rights – the Right to Build, Right to Bid, Right to Challenge – and how to access funding to facilitate the exercising of these rights:
www.mycommunityrights.org.uk

Community Knowledge Hub

Locality has established a national network for community libraries where advice can be offered and knowledge shared:
libraries.communityknowledgehub.org.uk/

Local Level Rural Proofing

DEFRA, with a number of partners, has prepared guidance and case studies to assist local authorities and others in ensuring that their policies and programmes take the needs of rural communities into account.
randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=18130

Rural Services Network

The Rural Services Network is a membership organisation devoted to safeguarding and improving services in rural communities across England. They provide information and resources including case studies.
www.rsnonline.org.uk/

Action with Communities in Rural England

ACRE is a national body which supports rural communities through its Rural Community Action Network.
www.acre.org.uk

Plunkett Foundation

The Foundation supports rural communities through community ownership and enterprise:
www.plunkett.co.uk

Other references and good practice guides

Other guides are also available on relevant topics:

- Arts Council England, Envisioning the library of the future, 2012 (forthcoming) (See www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-libraries/libraries-consultation/)

- CILIP, What makes a good library? Guidelines on public library provision in England for portfolio holders in local Councils, 2010

- DCMS has published three reports on philanthropic giving to the cultural sector, including Democratising Philanthropy, looking at how digital technology can enable this (see www.culture.gov.uk)

- LGA, Local Solutions for Future Local Library Services, 2012

- Locality, Understanding Community Asset Transfer, 2012

- Volunteering England, A guide to avoiding job substitution, 2012