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Public libraries... sustainable but not as we know them

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*Deb and her co-authors Geoff Nichols, Lindsay Findlay-King and Gordon Macfadyen won the Campbell Adamson Memorial Prize for the best research paper for ‘Asset transfer in libraries’ at the Voluntary Sector and Volunteering Research Conference.*

During 2014 academics from Newcastle University Business School, Sheffield University Management School and Northumbria University Department of Sport Development set out to identify how community asset transfer was being applied to public-provided leisure services (which include sport, art galleries, museums and libraries) and to look at the use of volunteers in this process. In total the scoping exercise identified over 20 examples of asset transfer in public leisure services, within this scoping exercise six library cases were highlighted.

**The catalyst for change**

With a few rare exceptions, our research found that the catalyst for asset transfer was Chancellor George Osborne’s 2010 Spending Review with a proposed structural deficit reduction by 2015.

In 2015 the austerity measures continue to impact on the provision of services, with local authorities looking to the voluntary sector for support in providing leisure services. Libraries are different to sports and leisure facilities because the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act requires local authorities to provide a library provision.

**Communities are passionate about their libraries**

We found that communities are responding to these challenges and changes in library provision passionately; vocally and their action can be construed as a form of associative democracy, as many of the resulting libraries are independent of the state and acting together volunteers providing a collective good. – this is slightly unclear on the meaning. Suggested change = “We found that communities are responding to these challenges and changes in library provision passionately. Their actions can be construed as a form of associative democracy, as many of the resulting libraries are independent of the state and acting together volunteers provide a collective good

*“The response [to potential closure] was vociferous” (Conwy)*

Libraries have high local political profiles and the users, occasional users and non-users share a strong sense of community ownership – many have existed for several generations as both a service and a physical building. The local community have an emotional
attachment that can motivate voluntary action, public meetings and consultations were attended by significant numbers and campaigning groups such as friends groups developed to voice the opinions of the local and wider communities and stakeholders.

In most of the examples campaign group members evolved into volunteers interested in the management of the library. However having saved the building and service, some people exited the process at this stage, unable to take part in the day to day management of the service, although remaining involved in a more passive role as user and /or “friend”.

One size does not fit all
There is no set model and there were a range of transfer arrangements and roles of volunteers within these. Some libraries became completely autonomous like Jesmond in Newcastle upon Tyne, while others had volunteers replacing paid staff as in Gateshead with the authority managing the building.

A variety of terms were used to describe the volunteer led organisation including:

- community library
- friends of the library
- association
- a community hub.

Some positive outcomes
The most positive outcome to asset transfer and volunteers coming together is that many libraries remain open, if in a different format.

Local communities feel involved and empowered, the libraries have made efforts to be seen as more market and community oriented and being close to the community has allowed flexibility to deal with the local needs; introducing different activities and encouraging various user groups.

“Book buying we’re definitely deliberately trying to buy books to meet what we think our customers need or want” (Jesmond)

For individuals their skills and knowledge (human capital) has improved through their volunteer experience. Volunteers are highly motivated and creative, developing new services and many felt closer and in tune with the community needs as they lived there.

Unlike the leisure service such as a swimming pool, libraries had limited additional income streams other than local authority funding. Therefore identifying viable income streams was essential and reducing costs through simple efficiencies, such as employing a local cleaner, were highlighted.

Many challenges ahead
- Of prime concern is the libraries’ sustainability. The transformation of the library service may only be possible in areas where volunteers have high levels of human and social capital, specifically the ability to network.
• Ongoing volunteer commitment and management of volunteers to provide a viable service is needed as the closure of local volunteer centres, with their experience of supporting and training, is a problem.
• Identification of income generation opportunities is required for the long-term economic viability of the libraries.
• Many transfers happened in a relatively short space of time and the continuing pace of budget cuts could outstrip the speed at which volunteer groups can be developed.

The change in provision has opened the debate on what a 21st Century library should offer to be sustainable.