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**The community asset  
transfer of libraries:  
considerations in  
community managed  
libraries taking a lease.**

# The community asset transfer of libraries: considerations in community managed libraries taking a lease.

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The report is based on interviews conducted in community libraries in one town. It relates this to national research. In this report libraries have been anonymised and the city has been anonymised as Northtown. The views in the report are those of the researchers. They do not reflect those of Northtown Council.

## **The community asset transfer of libraries; considerations in community managed libraries taking a lease.**

### **Summary**

This report covers the considerations involved in community managed libraries taking a lease with their Council. This is related to the long-term sustainability of community managed libraries. The main advantages of a lease are control over adaptations to the building, enhanced ability to bid for grants and protecting the assets accumulated by the community. The main disadvantage of a lease is the transfer of liabilities, especially maintenance costs. Libraries have found it difficult to find the appropriate people in the council to negotiate the details of the lease with. The lease offered may need to be adapted to accommodate the range of activities the volunteers want to develop, rather than using one suitable for a traditional library. To protect themselves against unexpected maintenance costs libraries may commission their own independent surveys of the building before taking a lease.

Lease negotiations are understood within the context of 'community asset transfer' of libraries. The decision to take a lease reflects the library trustees' confidence in the long-term financial sustainability of the library and its ability to raise income. This varies with the opportunities offered by the building, the imagination of the volunteer managers and the relative affluence or deprivation of the catchment area. The libraries also need to be able to sustain volunteer commitment. Some are

reliant on a few key volunteers, and have had difficulty recruiting to management roles. This has made the council initially cautious about arranging a lease with a volunteer led organisation.

The ability to respond more flexibly to community needs is one of the major benefits of volunteer management. This has transformed the nature of the libraries: many are running twice as many activities as previously. They have transformed into 'community hubs'. This means they have diversified the service they are offering, and this has become much more heterogeneous between libraries. In areas of greater deprivation the libraries are offering more social services; for example; helping users gain employment skills and alleviating social isolation by extending opening hours during holiday times. The diversification and expansion of services means that while financial support from the council has been reduced the support remaining is achieving a great deal more benefit to the communities.

Each library has to strike a balance between achieving economic sustainability and meeting a social mission. They do not regard themselves as businesses, but rather have to use some business practices to achieve their purpose. By comparing libraries according to the level of social deprivation of residents in their catchment areas we can see considerable differences. In areas that are more affluent it is easier to recruit volunteers and they will bring a wider range of skills. In more disadvantaged areas it is harder to recruit trustees and the volunteers will need more support. In these areas the act of

volunteering may be as important to the development and welfare of the volunteer as it is to providing a service for the library. Libraries accept and recognise this. Similarly, libraries in more advantaged areas are able to raise more income themselves. This means that the services offered by the libraries transferred to volunteer management will be able to capitalise on the enthusiasm, imagination and flexibility of the volunteers running them but the service offered will diverge according to the levels of affluence and deprivation of their catchment areas. This is an argument for the council allocating more resources to those in the more disadvantaged areas.

Volunteers are motivated to support their own local library. They do not feel an affiliation to libraries across the city, or the country in general; or at least not

enough to motivate them to travel across the city to volunteer somewhere else. The report does not consider the political views of volunteer library managers in detail. In brief, this varies between accepting CAT of libraries as an inevitable consequence of cuts in public expenditure and focusing on the benefits; to feeling uncomfortable in acquiescing in a process, which by its success may justify further cuts.

The report is based on interviews conducted in community libraries in one town. It relates this to national research. In this report libraries have been anonymised as A – H, and the city has been anonymised as Northtown. Quotations are from interviews unless otherwise indicated. The views in the report are those of the researchers. They do not reflect those of Northtown Council.

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## 1. Background - The transfer of libraries in Northtown to community management

In common with other councils, Northtown has had to adapt to major cuts in its budget over the last ten years. When the decision was reluctantly taken to cut library budgets in 2013, three categories of library were identified: ones to keep, ones that were high priority but could not be afforded, and ones which were least priority and would be closed. 'Priority' was estimated using a combination of the social deprivation of the area serviced (with those in areas of high deprivation prioritised), and the amount of use the library had.

As a result, five 'co-delivered' libraries were established. These were in high priority areas but the council could not afford to run them. The library staff; now volunteers; run the library service. The council pays for the upkeep of the building and there is no lease. The volunteer group have some limited say in the development of the building and the council provides the books. The library is automatically part of the central system for managing loans between libraries. These libraries are all in areas of social deprivation, apart from one, which was included because of its high level of use. A further 11 'associate' libraries were established. These would also have been closed. Groups protesting against the closures changed into groups prepared to respond to expressions of interest to run the library as volunteers. These libraries have opted to keep using the central system for book management – so users can borrow from the central

pool of books. There was initially no funding for these libraries. However, in response to the volunteers' proposals to take on management of the libraries the council provided a grant of £252,000 p.a. for running costs. This was distributed between the libraries in proportion to the running costs in 2013/14. For example, Library F (see appendix) received a grant of £9,500 in 2014 and for each of the initial three years. In the fourth year this went down to £7000 and in the sixth year it went down to £6000. At the same time, utility costs have gone up.

All the associate libraries were transferred to volunteer management in October 2014, except one in in October 2015 and one in February 2016. The associate libraries have been offered leases on the buildings. These are originally for 5 years, with an option of extending to 25 years subject to a 10 year business plan or proof of external funding, such as via a grant or supporting organisation. The decision to take a lease, or not, is the focal point of this research, but it leads into questions about the sustainability of the libraries, both financially and in terms of volunteer contribution.

Almost uniquely amongst local authorities Northtown employs a community library support officer who's role is to support the co-delivered and associate libraries. Prior to this, volunteers had been able to get support on the process of transfer from staff at the local volunteer support centre. In general, volunteer support services have been reduced. Thus, libraries in Northtown are particularly fortunate to have the support of a specialised officer.

## 2. The national context of community asset transfer of libraries

Since April 2011, at least 576 libraries have been transferred to being run entirely by volunteers for some of the time (Public Libraries News, 2019a). The transfer of libraries from public sector management to management by local groups of volunteers is termed 'community asset transfer' (CAT). The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG, now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) define CAT as the transfer of management and/or ownership of public land and buildings from its owner (usually a local authority) to a community organisation for less than market value – to achieve a local social, economic or environmental benefit (Locality 2018a). Libraries are just one example. Others are sports facilities, museums, arts facilities, and playing fields. In the 'asset transfer' of local authority sports facilities the market is dominated by a small number of large leisure trusts or private contractors (Findlay-King et al., 2018a). In contrast, this type of national organisation only runs a few libraries. A recent report noted that the only large trusts to have taken contracts for outsourced library provision are: Carillion, who are now bankrupt; Greenwich Leisure Limited, who run library services in Bromley, Greenwich, Dudley, Wandsworth and Lincolnshire; and Libraries Unlimited, who run Torbay and Devon library services (O'Bryan, 2018, Public Libraries News, 2019b). Anecdotally there are a few others.

Under New Labour a rationale for CAT was empowerment of local communities and an openness to using the most effective combination of the private, public and voluntary sectors to deliver services. This policy was influenced by the Quirk review, which, writing before the economic policy of cuts in public expenditure, argued for the transfer of assets to the voluntary sector (Quirk 2007). Under the coalition government from 2010 an idealistic agenda to promote a 'Big Society', in which the third sector was enabled to flourish in a space left by the withdrawal of the state, was overwhelmed by practical realities of cuts in local authority budgets. Between 2010 and 2015 the average cut in local authority budget across England was £130.06 per person (SPERI, 2015). The same report (p.6) notes that 'Northtown City Council, experienced a reduction of spending power of £198.47 per person between 2010/11 and 2014/15. This is significantly above the average for Labour councils and England in general. Northtown is in the 84th most deprived local authority area in England (326 councils in total), that is, in the third decile of the deprivation distribution. Yet its spending cut is significantly above the average for councils in the third decile. ... while Northtown has large pockets of relative affluence, it also has significant problems associated with deprivation .. it is a divided city.'

In general, government sponsored reports have put a positive spin on CAT. For example, a report for the Department Culture, Media and Sport advocated promoting volunteering through its benefits to the volunteers (Fujiwara et al., 2014) and does not consider 'volunteer

burn out' from the work required to manage a CAT; or that volunteers may feel obliged reluctantly to replace paid workers to maintain a facility threatened by transfer. A survey of local authorities in 2016 (Schultz) concluded there had been a shift away from community empowerment toward cost savings, and a focus towards reducing maintenance costs and liabilities. To do this, and increase revenue, local government has sold over 4000 buildings per year, over a five-year period, from 2012/13 to 2016/17 (Locality, 2018b). In practice local government's response has been a balance between a reaction to austerity and the positive outcomes implied by the 'big society' rhetoric.

Libraries are susceptible to local government budget cuts as the statutory requirement to provide them is ambiguous. The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 states that local authorities should "...provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof" but 'comprehensive' is not defined. In contrast, there is no statutory requirement to provide sports centres. However, these facilities can react to a reduced subsidy by generating income from users.

In general, local politicians do not want to close facilities but they do have to be wary of the transfer failing and having to work with a new community group (Locality, 2018a). Community groups have generally emerged to prevent a library closing, and have then transformed into an organisation to manage it. A recent study of 61 transferred libraries (SERIO, 2017) found a great diversification

in services provided, as the volunteers had the understanding and flexibility to adapt to local needs. Northtown libraries illustrate this.

Transferred libraries, broadly, take three forms (O'Bryan, 2018):

- Community managed libraries (CMLs) - community led and largely community delivered, rarely with paid staff, but often with professional support and some form of ongoing local authority support. These are the co-delivered and associate libraries in Northtown. Analysis of CIPFA data on figures on issues and visits suggests these have performed best on these measures. However, this analysis is limited by the small number of libraries providing the data (O'Bryan, 2018).
- Community supported libraries (CSLs) - council-led and funded, usually with paid professional staff, but given significant support by volunteers.
- Independent libraries (ILs) - run fully independently of the local authority library service.

### 3. Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in libraries A – H in Northtown between August and October 2019. These are all 'associate' libraries (See Appendix, Table 1). Interviews were with trustees or chairs of the management committee. These were transcribed and coded to identify themes. Where possible these have been combined with information from annual reports.



## 4. Results – taking a lease

### 4.1 Advantages of a lease

Four of the libraries interviewed had a lease. In the case of Library C, this was signed in 2002 between a Health Living Centre Trust and the council.

The main advantage of having a lease is that it allows the library to alter the building to make it more responsive to the needs of the community. In Northtown, and nationally, the transfer of libraries to management by local volunteers has allowed them to change the service offered by the library and transform it into a ‘community hub’. This is described in more detail below. The libraries who have taken a lease have found it easier to make minor alterations such as moving shelves or painting walls; but also bigger alterations such as building a toilet (Library H). A lease opens the possibility of developing the building, such as creating an extra community room or office spaces, which could be rented out to increase income. Libraries A, D, F and H had all considered this type of development. The autonomy a lease gives means the library does not have to spend time trying to gain approval for changes with council property services or a set of contractors; which was likened to ‘trying to untangle a bowl of spaghetti, trying to find out who you need to talk to get an answer’. The lease allows the library to effect repairs immediately, provided they have the resources. It allows them to use help “in kind” from local traders and organisations, rather than having to use council-approved contractors who could take longer and be more expensive. Being able to do repair

work quickly becomes more important as the library becomes more dependent on raising its own income, as if it is closed for a period because of waiting for work to be done this will lose income. This affected Library E while it was waiting for steps to be repaired.

Another example of cost saving was Library C’s sourcing of reconditioned PC’s rather than having to use the Council’s contract with Capita. Other research into community asset transfer for sports facilities has found that management by local volunteers has enabled cost savings to be made through attention to detail and flexibility; for example, the willingness to change utility providers to obtain the best rate or changing the lighting to LED bulbs (Findlay-King. et al 2018b).

The second, and related, advantage of a lease is that it enables the library to bid for grants. Longer leases, extended from 3, to 5 to 25 years, offer more grant possibilities. This was the reason for Library A negotiating a longer lease.

Thirdly, libraries may want to extend the lease to protect the investments they have made. For example, Library H was able to raise enough themselves to pay for a new toilet, and did not have to bid for a grant for this. However, they extended their lease from 5 years to 25 because they didn’t want to be in a position where they had spent a lot of money on the building and then in two years’ time might have to hand it back to the council.

## 4.2 Disadvantages of a lease

The main reason for not taking a lease is accepting liability for maintenance work. This was a reason preventing Library E taking a lease as they thought they would be irresponsible to take on potential repair costs of the roof. Even if a library is confident it can meet routine maintenance costs, it would not be able to meet large unanticipated costs; such as rewiring or replacing a boiler. Other costs libraries reported they would need to cover included: health and safety checks, such as fire alarm monitoring and compliance testing; and buildings insurance. Library A were so concerned about potential maintenance work they would not be able to afford that they built a clause into their lease to protect themselves against this potential liability. Libraries do not have assurance of continued council funding after March 2020, so as one pointed out, they would be reckless to take on the commitments of a lease in the second half of 2019 while facing this financial uncertainty.

## 4.3 Negotiating a lease

Libraries were aware they needed to take care negotiating a lease. Library H were the first associate library to take a lease. Before they did so they commissioned their own independent survey of the structure of the building, although the council had also done one. Library D were glad in retrospect that as a consequence of the lengthy lease negotiations they realised the roof needed repairing and the library needed rewiring; and that they should not sign a lease until this work was done. The process of lease negotiation was

protracted; for Library H this took 18 months. This was partly due to a lack of clarity over who to negotiate with in the council over specific details. In contrast the example was given of another local authority where one department of the council had responsibility for dealing with all the leases of community assets.

Another complication was that the leases offered were prepared for a traditional library so did not include the range of activities the library might want to expand into; such as serving tea and coffee, alcohol, or gambling – which could be interpreted as running a lottery. Library H found they had to renegotiate these clauses; which might reflect the care and experience Library H trustees brought to their lease negotiation but also their library lease being the first to be negotiated. The attention to detail by the Library H trustees illustrates how without this Library D might have accepted a lease with liabilities for major repairs on the roof and the rewiring of the building.

Outstanding repair work could be used as a bargaining chip in lease negotiations. Library E suggested that if their roof was repaired, which had been outstanding for some time, they would then sign a lease. On the other hand, this library saw little advantage in having a lease, as they did not plan to make any grant applications which it would facilitate. Further, some of the liabilities the library would become responsible for might more effectively be met by the council. For example, one would expect it to be cheaper for the council to conduct health and safety checks [unless they have been outsourced to a contractor who provides a more costly service] and insurance.

Library D reported that they felt a barrier to negotiating a lease was that the property department of the council were not confident in the reliability of the library trustees to run the building. An intervention by a councillor with a background in the voluntary sector was required to persuade them otherwise. There was also an impression that the council did not want to give away control. This reflects the finding of a survey of 68 local authority officers in 2016; that 'The vast majority of local authority respondents (90%) restricted the use of assets, above and beyond planning use restrictions. The results illustrate a tendency to seek to control outcomes through contractual terms as opposed to trust in the governance and existing regulatory frameworks intended to protect the public interest' (Schultz, 2016, p 36). The same research, found that community organisations (from a sample of 306) found lease negotiations difficult because councils wanted to include restrictive clauses. This reflects the difficulty councils have in dealing with CATs. They may see them as a viable way of maintaining services, which might otherwise be lost, but at the same time are inexperienced in managing contacts and leases with volunteer led groups; and are reluctant to lose control.

#### 4.4 Leases – an interim conclusion

Negotiating a lease is a business transaction. The ability to do this is unevenly distributed between the associate libraries. The libraries have to take care not to commit themselves to potential liabilities they can't afford, while also being aware of the advantages of a

lease. The libraries who have negotiated a lease could provide a valuable service to those who are considering it, by giving advice and support. An experienced group of trustees could form a negotiating team to act on behalf of other libraries.

In general, the process of a library negotiating a lease will be easier if the council had one point of contact for the negotiations.

Councils should build on their experience to prepare a standard lease for a community library. A set of optional clauses could be used to accommodate individual circumstances and take account of the ways libraries might like to diversity services.

## 5. Results - the transformation of community libraries

The willingness, or not, of a community library to take a lease has to be understood in the broader context of:

- the transformation of the libraries to community hubs
- economic sustainability
- volunteer sustainability
- the balance between running a business and meeting a social mission
- the uneven distribution of social capital
- the focus of volunteers on the 'local'.

These points structure the rest of this report.

### 5.1 Transformation of the libraries to community hubs

National research has found that as library management is transferred from the public sector to volunteers the libraries change the services they provide (Serio, 2017). This is because the volunteer managed libraries have the flexibility to respond to local needs, the volunteers are willing to experiment, they want to serve the local community and at the same time generate revenue. A recent case study of Mitcheldean Library (Serio, 2017) found it offered 21 'enhanced services', above those a library might normally provide. This diversification has been noted in the press (Barnett, 2018). An even greater diversification was found in the libraries in Northtown. The details in the extensive quotes below contrast how provision has matched local demand and how the libraries have been able to experiment with new sessions. This matches the

conclusion of the Quirk report, that 'community groups and social enterprises are amazingly heterogeneous in scope, scale and capabilities and pursue a bewildering array of purposes and missions' (2007, p5).

Library H, developments:

*'Well there wasn't a public toilet so we built a public toilet ... there were no facilities for disabled people or children with babies so with the fundraising from the first two or three years we built that last year. We recently ... replaced all the computers because they were so slow. ... we've got a book-buying fund now so we spend about £4000 a year from our own money on books but we also take donations. ... So we've added 4 or 5 thousand donated books into stock as well over the last 3 years ... I think the biggest change that we've made is turning it from the library into the sort of community centre. So we produce this leaflet every three months and this has got all the groups that use it and there was less than half the number of groups when we took over running it. Before we ran it there was a book group, councillors surgery, there was a computer thing, there was story time for children and the history group, there was about 5 or 6 groups a week - and now there's ... more than one thing every day ... we run a couple of groups ourselves, ... we run the baby time group and we run the story time group but we've brought other volunteer organisations in so we've partnered with an organisation called People Keeping Well which is an NHS and Age UK supported initiative so they use this as a hub and they've got this supporting memories group which they run. They do another one ... called Natter on a*

*Thursday morning which is sort of a coffee morning and a welcoming thing for people over the age of 65 and then we've partnered with other people so there's a lady which runs children's French classes, we have a lady who does Yoga giving a health walk.'*

*'So we've tried to bring in a lot more groups to use the library so it is used every evening and at weekends. We have a community cinema ... So we've tried to turn it from just book borrowing into a kind of community sort of hub. ... in the Autumn we've got a 5-year birthday party planned on the Saturday 5th October which is a sort of community daytime event and we will have games and treasure hunt, face painting for children, and we've got the different community groups that do things in the library. ... the Library H History group are going to do a local history walk and the friends of Field Wood are going to do a quiz. We will have the gardeners doing an activity outside. So we are doing that and then we've got a folk concert ...'*

This extensive quote lists at least 18 activities or groups and illustrates how the library has diversified.

Library A, developments:

This library provides a contrast because of its different catchment area, and examples of sessions which did not work, but which show a willingness to experiment:

*... 'we've doubled the capacity ... there is universal credit which seems to be drawing a few more people in and things like story-time. Now we get 21 children most weeks .... one of our goals at the beginning was to try and get the citizens*

*advice service based on the estate again and for a while there is a food bank that meets in the church on a Tuesday who have a citizen advice worker there but she is only funded to see food bank clients but we know there is a much bigger need than just those entitled to the food bank so we managed to get some funding and the rest of it we made up from our own funds for a 12-month period and so we decided to put that on a Tuesday but we would actually open as a public session partly because whenever the doors are open there is always members of the public wanting to use it .... Story time on a Wednesday morning, which ... is regularly getting around 20 children plus parents and carers coming along which makes it quite rowdy. We have a reading group once a month on a Wednesday and we have a craft group in the afternoon on a Wednesday and a Friday and we have a professional tutor in to give them ideas... we get a lot of donated books so we probably have around 4000, ... some we brought ... We had someone from the development trust who used to come in and do IT classes which worked for a while but then they seemed to run out of clients so we haven't been doing that for a while and the craft group that I talked about on a Wednesday and Friday it started as a Knit and natter group and failed, after six months it was just the two friends who had started it pretty much but then it changed round.... It's more a craft thing and knitting is a big part of it but one guy comes in and either does the jigsaws or he does the artwork, it's pictures that he's coloured and done so a range of different things. The original thing ran for 6 months and then died a death and then someone else came along and said I've got this idea for a reading and writing group*

*and that never happened either but the same group evolved into the craft group and they went through this phrase of starting knitting and then gradually other people came on and started doing this so they all meet here on a Wednesday and Friday and do whatever they fancy doing. There are a few things we've tried to get off the ground just haven't happened (like) the reading group which has been limping on for the last 2 or 3 months ... but that's mainly a women's group and we tried to establish a men's group because obviously book titles and things would be potentially different and that's never happened, just hasn't drawn enough momentum or got somebody to act as the vocal point for it.'*

*'I guess it's about flexibility as well and some of that is about if you get people with different ideas sometimes you just need to let an idea run and just see where it goes. So it's structure, variety of volunteers and with the volunteers comes a degree of creativity and with that as well comes an awareness of what works and what's needed in the community because people come in with ideas of things that would benefit them and if it benefits them within the community the chances are it will benefit other people as well.'*

*'... one of the things we do is that we open over Christmas, not Bank Holiday days but the days in between when the council libraries and most other libraries are all closed and most other services are closed. I'm not sure if we've done it twice or three times but we knew there was a need because of the isolation thing and we don't get huge numbers in but 20 or 30 each day, but for those 20 or 30 people it's*

*a bit of a lifeline and we will probably do that again this year but again it's that community space that's providing something different and providing them somewhere to be.'*

*'...we want to talk to people and we have people say you are the first person I've spoken to for days and we think that's an important part of what we are offering. It was always part of what we wanted to offer, a safe space, something that combatted social (isolation) and gave people a space to come and that's happening as well. That's one of the regular bits of feedback we get. It is a family of community where they belong and people not knowing what they were doing and how they would manage if they didn't have this place to come and meet up with other people which is always one of the things we wanted to achieve.'*

The two examples show the libraries have become something very different to the library they have replaced. It is interesting to relate this to journalistic accounts (Smith, 2015). As a respondent said:

*'It is a different thing and what is interesting before and after is in terms of what exactly we've got up to in the last five years and how it's changed us. We've moved from survival mode at the beginning to really thinking very deeply about book stock and book management, what we are doing here, what are the primary aims and that has brought out a real focus on what books people want to read, inspiring everybody with a love of reading to children, getting people better computerised, building it as a community resource, a real community hub and*

*community that does all sorts of things but belongs to the community and it's run for the community by the community. We are not a separate group of people who are kind of doing this to the citizens of area F. We arose naturally out of the woodwork as concerned citizens to keep it open and we knew that Libraries were important but it's only really since we took this on and started really working ... that we've realised what it brings to the community. If it wasn't here it would be so damaging if the library was to shut. The social glue would have been wiped away.... If you've got a library you've got a springboard, there's so much that happens in the community and needs to happen with all the social pressures there are nowadays.'*

Thus, the libraries have changed to serve a different function in the community. As Library A shows, this extends to combatting isolation and loneliness. Library B described how *'people will come in for a cuppa. People will come in to sit down. People often come in here because they've got nowhere else to go. So people come in when they're right at the bottom and nowhere to go so we are often making calls to social services. A few times we have had to ring the crisis team so often when people are quite desperate they will come in.'*

It has not been possible to put a value on this, 'that's probably the hardest thing to measure the impact we have on people' (Library B) but the volunteers involved think it is much more than was being provided before. One implication is that the value provided for the council grant is much greater, and if it was withdrawn and the library was no longer viable, so much

more would be lost. Secondly, the volunteer commitment has grown, as they are no longer just preserving the previous service, but the enhanced one.

Not only have the ways the libraries developed since transfer to volunteer management made them distinctive, but also the ways they have responded to unique circumstances.

In the Northtown examples, Library G stood out because of its involvement in redevelopment plans with private companies, due to the considerable investment required in an old building. In other respects, it illustrated the increased diversity of services offered. The uncertainty and complexity of development plans made the roles of the trustees and chair especially demanding.

Library G is housed in one of the original Carnegie funded library buildings. The building needed considerable investment and repair work. A commercial company proposed to buy the building from the council, repair it, and lease the existing children's library space back to the council on a 125-year lease. The Library G group would then lease back the space from the council on a 25-year lease. While redevelopment was taking place the library would relocate to a local church hall. These arrangements were hotly debated amongst the library group. A deal with the private sector, and moving the library service to another building, were both contentious.

As part of this arrangement a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, £67,000, was obtained, which paid for the employment of three staff, but had to be spent by

September 2019. The commercial group withdrew from the arrangement in 2018. The Lottery grant has been extended while negotiations take place with another partner. This involves establishing a set of 'business units' one of which would be a café. A new Lottery bid has been submitted in November 2019, and the outcome should be known in March 2020. Building work would start in July 2020 for a reopening in August 2021. The parts of the building the library would use are still being discussed. The original HLF grant has supported the workers, who have been able to apply for other grants to run specific sessions. Given the layout of the building there is little space available for income generation and use has been made of a local church hall for some activities. For example, a LGBT film night and a poetry evening with a local poet. A popular activity was a drain spotting tour which looked at the first drain systems going into Northtown. Every drain cover had a design on it advertising a different water company or sewage company. It is planned to use this church space to run the library from while the building is being redeveloped. Uncertainty over the future makes fund raising and donations more difficult. It certainly makes the role of the chair and other trustees more complicated.

These three example libraries illustrate how they have diversified to 'community hubs', but also how they have become much more heterogeneous.

## 5.2 Economic sustainability

When planning activities all of the libraries were aware of how enhanced services and grants might contribute to economic sustainability. As one library put it: '... it's financial, so as long as we give a good service and we are making a surplus I'm happy. It's a bit like running your own business except nobody is paid.'

For example, nearly every extra activity run at Library E was supported by a grant or a voluntary donation. Grants had supported science events for children, a new computer, a big I pad and Tai Chi classes. At the same time, they asked for a voluntary donation for children's events (£1.50) and the Tai Chi classes. They were very aware that they had to make enough to cover the running costs. Similarly, Library D tries to keep a contingency fund for maintenance by saving £3000 per year. Library A tries to keep a contingency fund which would be enough to enable them to run for 12 – 15 months if the council grant was withdrawn.

None of the libraries said they were in financial difficulties, but all of them felt they needed to be prudent. While independent status helps them apply for grants, these are always for individual projects, such as a programme or building project. They will not cover routine maintenance and running costs.

As above –national operators to take contracts to manage public libraries are Greenwich Leisure Limited, who run library services in Bromley, Greenwich, Dudley, Wandsworth and Lincolnshire; and Libraries Unlimited, who run Torbay



and Devon library services (O'Bryan, 2018). It would be interesting to research their 'business model', if where willing to share it.

### 5.3 Volunteer sustainability

A second concern with CATs is sustainability of volunteer effort and enthusiasm. Volunteers may initially have been motivated by the desire to save a library, but then need to commit to the long-term task of running it. The proportion of the population engaged in volunteering, has been static since 1979 (Lindsey, et al. 2018). Studies of sports clubs run by volunteers; which are similar in this respect to community libraries, find that volunteer effort is concentrated in a few of the key roles and it is difficult to replace volunteers in these positions (Barrett et al. 2018). Thus, it would not be surprising if libraries had difficulty recruiting volunteers, especially to the main positions of responsibility.

The number of volunteers and trustees in the libraries is reported in table 1. The library which seemed to find it easiest to recruit trustees was Library H. It aimed for a minimum of 8, but had been able to recruit 12, which made it easier to spread the work around. Three of these were stepping down this, year, but three replacements were available. '... we are fortunate as well being in this area where there are a lot of professional people.' However, they still felt that 'the other big challenge ... is none of us are getting any younger, ... and keeping recruiting volunteers and bringing people into the organisation'.

Several libraries reported they were either short of volunteers, or those with specific skills. Library E at one point had gone down to 3 trustees and was not viable. They had since grown to 8, but two of them did a large proportion of the work, so were concerned if the library could keep running if they were unable to continue. Library D also reported going down to the minimum number of trustees at one point, and finding it difficult to find someone to take over as chair. Library A found it difficult to recruit volunteers who were ready to take responsibility so they had to spend a lot of time developing them. They attributed this to the area they were in and the communities they serve. They had specific difficulty getting someone to clean the library, although they had a regular core of volunteers at the counter. Library F could easily have split up volunteer tasks if it had more volunteers, and had not been able to find a volunteer to manage the web page. Library G found it difficult to replace trustees.

Thus, there is a concern over the sustainability of volunteers. This confirms one of the council's reservations about giving a lease to a volunteer led group – how confident can they be that it is sustainable?

### 5.4 The balance between running a business and meeting a social mission

While all the libraries were aware of the need to achieve economic sustainability, this was balanced against their aims in providing the library.

'... we run events here for two reasons. We run them to raise money and we run

them to offer something to the community. The best events do both so things like the farmers' markets which we run three a year that's one of our biggest money earners. We did an open gardens event in June I think and that brought in just under £2500 for us. We did a big Harry Potter day .... those events those are really good because they are community events and they raise money but we have done events where, ... it isn't really a fundraising model ... it's something for the community'.

Another library in a more disadvantaged area explained, 'We did try and put costs on some of the groups as well, but that then formed a barrier and that's not what it's about. It's important to fundraise but we're not about making money. It's more about getting people through the door and getting people to access our services.'

More specifically, a library described what it would, and would not, do: *'Yes we have to be a bit entrepreneurial. When we came up with the things that we wanted to make money from ... we try to make sure that they are things that benefit the community so they're not just purely commercial. We are not taking advertising from an estate agent. So we try and look through a lens of does this add to the library being a community hub and help us raise money at the same time and that is where we commit it from. So if it's an event for people to come to the library, if it is selling artwork by local artists, and if it is plants and things that local people want or having a celebration event of something, but it's not purely commercial, so we don't ... have a Costa coffee (machine). For our community cinema we are not technically supposed to*

*sell tickets, we sell raffle tickets and we always have a prize and they generally are from local businesses. It might only be a cup of tea and a cake from the café but it's a bit of advertising for them so we try and do things for the community.'*

In general, interviewees qualified defining their library as a 'business', despite having to archive economic sustainability. Academic theory has thought of voluntary sector organisations which adopt public or private sector practices as 'hybrid organisations (Billis, 2010). The driving forces of a voluntary sector association of people is their collective enthusiasms and values. For the private sector it is to make a profit, and for the public sector it is to intervene in the market to achieve social objectives. The associate libraries started as organisations campaigning to keep a library open, and transformed into ones which manage them. In this process they are likely to adopt some of the practices of the private or public sector as they become a voluntary / public / private hybrid. .

Volunteers were aware of this distinction: *'we are not a community business – people don't want the responsibility of running a business – being a charity is quite enough. Some business practices may be useful, such as planning and project management; but there is not an aim to make a profit. It's a 'business with a small b.'*

This was illustrated in the way volunteers were managed. The libraries had a plan of the roles they needed filling, but balanced this against what the volunteers wanted to do and were able to do.

For example; *'So we have a volunteer application form which is on the website. There are [specific roles] but we tend to turn it the other way round and say actually what do you want to do and there are different roles from cleaning through to treasurer, IT, all the rest of it. So we start off with the person and say what skills have you got, what are you interested in doing and go from there.'* In another library: *'... people contribute what they can and want to contribute ... some people say from day one I'm not touching a computer but I want to volunteer so they then do the sales table as that's the thing that she wants to do and is good at doing it and it's raised probably 10 grand over the 5 years which is a huge contribution'*

Part of the social mission of the libraries is to support the community through developing the volunteers. This is more apparent in libraries in more disadvantaged areas and where a paid staff member is managing the volunteers:

*'most of the librarians, it's about getting out. It's a social thing. In fact, for most of them it is more of the social thing about getting out so it reduces isolation. ... We try and do things like at Christmas we will have a volunteers 'do' and things and we've started acknowledging their birthdays with just a card, nothing too much. Every other month we have a volunteers meeting which is a chance for them to come and meet the other volunteers but also tell us all what they've been up to as well. There's a lot more that we need to do.'*

There was no evidence that libraries felt uncomfortably compromised in their

balance between social and business aims, although the history of the Library G group shows that some disliked the partnership with the private sector company offering to buy the library. It would be interesting to see if compromises were forced on the volunteer led groups by being obliged to prioritise income generation, or if at this point the volunteers would become disengaged.

### 5.5 The consequences of the uneven distribution of social capital

We can think of social capital, broadly, as a collective resource available to group members and embedded in either formal structures or informal relationships. *'... a set of relationships and shared values created and used by multiple individuals to solve collective problems in the present and future'* (Ostrom, 2009: p22). It is not evenly distributed.

Research suggests that a move from public provision to volunteer led provision will accentuate social advantage. For example, research in Kent found the proportion of schools' income raised by the school itself was highest in the most advantaged areas. The differences in income raised by schools increased considerably between 2016 and 2018. We are not aware of similar research on libraries.

The capacity to volunteer and the skills volunteers have to offer are unevenly distributed. While levels of formal volunteering, in an organisation, has been static since 1979, adverse economic circumstances had negative effects on informal volunteering during the post-

2008 recessionary period (Lindsey, et al. 2018, p70). Studies of community asset transfer of sports facilities have found that they are most viable where social capital; volunteer time, confidence, skills and connections; are high (Findlay-King, et al. 2018b; Forbes et al. 2018). This is in the more affluent community groups. Conversely, in more disadvantaged areas volunteers have needed more support to take on a CAT.

The ability to raise income is also uneven. This is illustrated by Power to Change's guide to cafés in community businesses, (2019, p1): 'Cafés can be run for social or commercial purposes and the choice you make affects the customers you target, the pricing and the profitability .... A 'social purpose' cappuccino won't cost you more than about £1.60 whereas a 'commercial' cappuccino is unlikely to cost you less than £1.60 .... Where your café building is matters; and this can have a big influence on the types of customers you can attract, the price you can charge and the scale of café you can run.' Of course. Selling coffee is only one part of fundraising.

Relating this to the rank of libraries by social deprivation of catchment area, table one: Library A has the second most deprived catchment area of the 28 in Northtown, and Library H the second least deprived area. Library B described the difficulty raising income: *'We've tried to have a second-hand book sale and table-top sale. We don't really generate much from it if I'm honest. People round here don't have a lot of money so ... it's hard. We did try and put costs on some of the groups as well but that then formed a barrier and that's not what it's about.'*

Further research would be able to relate the deprivation rank to a measure of the social capital of trustees, the ease of recruiting volunteers, and the proportion of income raised by the libraries' own fund raising. However, the impression from the interviews is that it is easier to recruit volunteers, with more skills and confidence, in the most advantaged areas. As an interviewee remarked; slightly enviously; 'the trustees at Library H could run a small country'. The confidence and skills of the Library H volunteers is probably reflected in this library being the first to take a lease, but to negotiate it with care for the detail.

In contrast, as the descriptions of the libraries show, Library A is more concerned about helping the volunteers develop through volunteering and providing them with rewards of social inclusion. This library offers a citizens' advice worker room, an employment support worker and just a safe space to meet other people.

The libraries were aware of these differences between them and most referred to them in their interviews, naming those more, or less advantaged, and relating this to the ease of recruiting volunteers or raising income.

### 5.6 The focus of volunteers on the 'local'

The differences between libraries raises the question of if volunteers volunteer just for their own library, of for a library service in general. This is related to an academic argument over if volunteering in CATs is just a reaction to cuts in services due to local government budget cuts; or

led by a vision of something broader, and 'better' (Featherstone, et al 2012).

Volunteers were nearly all local to the particular library. Libraries had little successes in recruiting from further away, through the support agency, Voluntary Action Northtown. As an interviewee said: *'They don't want to travel to the other side of the city and they ... feel passionate about keeping the library open in their area because they use it, or their mum uses it, or they bring their children here, or it's at the end of their road and they don't want it to turn into an eye sore, or because it's derelict. They do not feel charitable enough to dig the council out of a problem and travel to the other side of the city ....'*

There were co-ordination meetings attended by representatives of some of the associate libraries. Libraries D, F, G and H tended to share practices, although Library E had not found it useful enough to attend the meetings. Some shared good practice informally, such as how to run film evenings or borrowing props for events. Some had jointly developed good practice, such as a GDPR system, and the system for cataloguing books bought by individual libraries. Most were willing to use a system in which the books they had bought themselves could be borrowed by users from other libraries, but it had not been practical to set this up. Beyond this; *'one of the things we haven't really cracked is acting collectively on behalf of all the volunteer libraries together. ... that would mean more jobs, a bank account, a constitution and all sorts of bureaucracy that none of us have got the time to do because we are all busy with our own libraries. ... it is a weakness'*.

The exception, to a point, was Library D, who had obtained a grant to employ a worker to extend their service into a neighbouring area, Beechfield. Library D and Beechfield are adjacent, but have completely different populations and are separated by a busy road with fast moving traffic. Analysis of borrowing showed that Beechfield's residents were very under-represented at Library D. So a room was being used in Beechfields community centre to base a supply of books in and Library D was looking for volunteers to go over and run it. A volunteer who was a retired teacher was already doing work with two classes in a local school.

In general volunteers were committed to their own library. However, they were prepared to pick up ideas from other areas and had visited libraries in Barnsley, Pontefract, South Norwood, Upper Norwood and West Norwood, for example. One library was aware of the Community Libraries Association, and the resources it produced. There are a range of support resources available for community libraries, but this research did not ask if the libraries were aware of them, or used them. For example, resources produced by Power to Change and The Community Managed Libraries Peer Network [1].

## 6. Conclusion - Taking a lease - the broader context

Section 4 dealt with the immediate advantages and disadvantages of an associate library taking a lease. Section 5 illustrated the background factors influencing this. If a library has trustees confident in their ability to ensure the library is economically viable, and that the volunteer effort is sustainable, the lease offers the opportunity to develop their library further as a community hub, given this describes an increasingly heterogeneous set of organisations. It will allow them to increase services to the community and at the same time raise further income. Libraries D and H illustrated this position. This is not to undervalue the different emphasis on the services offered by libraries A and B, such as providing a safe place to go and combatting social isolation.

On the other hand, a lease involves taking on liabilities of maintenance and other costs. A library which is not confident in its ability to meet these, sees limited ability to expand revenue, and is concerned that it may be vulnerable to a few trustees with major roles leaving; will be reluctant to take a lease.

The examples of how transferred libraries have diversified shows great benefits of transfer to volunteer led management. The service has developed to make a much more significant contribution to the local community. This means Northtown Council is getting better value in terms of subsidy per library, and volunteers' motivation is now to preserve what has been gained, rather than what was

potentially lost. The ability to diversify the service has meant the libraries have inevitably become more different.

The discussion of the uneven distribution of social capital, and the ability to raise revenue, shows that the move away from a public service means these differences will be reflected in what the transferred libraries can offer, and their ability to take a lease. Budget cuts have forced Northtown Council to focus on providing core social services. The threat of library closures has focussed volunteers on providing their local services. Even where they have spare capacity, motivation does not extend to providing library services across Northtown, or an affiliation to a national movement.

This report has not extended to reporting the political opinions of volunteers on the asset transfer of libraries. These vary from; accepting the situation as an inevitable consequence of cuts in public expenditure and focusing on the benefits; to feeling uncomfortable in acquiescing in a process, which by its success will justify further cuts. It was suggested that an ideal would be for volunteers to be supported by paid workers. This might provide a balance between the enthusiasm and imagination of volunteers, and the stability of a core of paid staff. However, would the volunteers have come forward initially without the threat of closure, and would they have been able to transform the service within a structure led by paid staff?

## 7. Further research

The analysis of differences between libraries could be developed by relating the deprivation rank of libraries to a measure of the social capital of trustees, the ease of recruiting volunteers, and the proportion of income raised by the libraries own fund raising. If this analysis was repeated over a period of time it would be able to show if income generation was diverging, thus replicating the research into income raised by schools in Kent. The co-delivered libraries in Northtown might provide an interesting contrast because most are in more disadvantaged areas of the city.

Research could find out the demographic profiles of volunteers, the skills they bring, the motivations and rewards they experience; and how these change with involvement. This could build on considerable research into volunteers in other areas.

There is a need to develop measures of impact which are practical for volunteers in libraries to implement, allow libraries to be compared, and can help justify support by stakeholders. This is difficult because of the range of impacts libraries have; from lending books to combatting loneliness. Upper Norwood Library Trust (2017); an example of a library managed by paid staff and delivered by volunteers; is piloting Twine; Power to Change's own impact measurement tool. Work by ProBono Economics (2017) claimed to pilot practical impact measures. Alternative measures are available from the New Economics Foundation, Project Outcome (used in US libraries), the Social

Accounting Network, and the Social Value Engine. Locality have also produced a guide. These are all aimed at community level groups. The 2018 DCMS guide to setting up a community library (2018) does not include a section on measuring impact.

It would be interesting to research the 'business model' of the national operators who have taken contracts to manage public libraries; including Greenwich Leisure Limited and Libraries Unlimited (O'Bryan, 2018). It would be interesting to see the extent they adopted business practices common to the sports facilities they run, the extent to which volunteers were involved in the service, and the amount of subsidy provided by the local councils. Why did the councils choose to give the management contract to these organisations? Was this as an alternative to management by local volunteers?

Another research question is how a community managed library develops its own organisational identity, separate from the volunteers who initially established it. In our cases the libraries have changed from council run, to ones saved from closure by a group of volunteers, to a new type of organisation after five years of transformation.

## Appendix

**Table 1. Northtown Libraries in this study; ranked by deprivation of catchment area.**

	Rank of deprivation index [1].	Trustees	Volunteers	Lease. Date and length
Library A	2	5	25-30	3/2019 5 years and option for 25.
Library B	3	2	25-30	No lease
Library C	9	8	30	2002 30 years. Under renegotiation.
Library D	16	10	110	2017 % years with an option for 25
Library E	18	8		No lease
Library F	19	8	39	No lease
Library G	23	8	70-80	No lease
Library H	27	12	120	2016

1. Ranked by indices of deprivation of catchment area, out of the 28 libraries in Northtown, in 2015. E.g. Of these 28 libraries, Library A's catchment area is the second most deprived in Northtown. Library H's catchment area is the second least deprived.

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Its vision is 'to create better places through community business'.

<https://www.powertochange.org.uk/about-us/>

The Community Managed Libraries Peer Network aims to help community libraries share good practice, and is funded by Power to Change.

<https://communitylibrariesnetwork.wordpress.com/about/>

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