An evaluation of community-managed libraries in Liverpool

Abstract

Purpose – Community libraries now constitute a significant proportion of library provision in the UK; however, there is relatively little research on how the transfer to this model has affected those libraries, and the wider balance of provision. This paper aims to broaden the discourse and understanding about the impact changing libraries to community models is having.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper provides a qualitative evaluation of all the libraries transferred to community-managed models within a large city council region in the UK. Structured research visits were made to appraise each library. These are discussed in the context of published literature and data both specific to the study area and nationally.

Findings – Transferring the management of libraries to community organisations is often reactive and perceived with negative associations. This study uncovers increases in use and diversification of services following transfer; however, support from the local authority and the previous experience of managing organisations are significant factors. It also reveals how successful transfer led to more following, but that support can be inconsistent when they do.

Originality/value – The paper provides a study of community-managed libraries across a large city council area, affording an in-depth understanding of their impact on overall provision over one region. It will be of value to those involved in library management and service provision at both local and strategic levels, including local authorities and community groups considering library transfer.

Keywords – Community-managed libraries, Public libraries, Library provision, Library services, Library support, Liverpool libraries

Paper type – Viewpoint

Introduction

Public-sector funding cuts to libraries in the United Kingdom during recent years have substantially altered the landscape of provision. Branch libraries have suffered particularly, with numerous closures and transfers from local authority control (Anstice, n.d.), such that community-managed libraries now constitute a notable proportion. Although the concept of the community library has been established for many years, it has changed dramatically due to a new political mindset and its regime of austerity. Previously associated with the enrichment of services, the transfer of libraries to community organisations or volunteer groups is now actively encouraged at policy level but often generates widespread criticism and consternation. Findlay-King *et al.* (2017, pp. 1-2) argue that the transfer of services could be defined as "austerity localism" – where volunteers or community groups fill the voids left by diminishing public provision; or it could be viewed as "progressive localism" – a movement that embraces new opportunities for community participation and is more responsive to local needs.

This paper presents an evaluation of all five libraries transferred to community organisations within one large city council area in the UK. It seeks to understand how moving out of local authority control has affected service provision, the ways in which it has changed these library spaces, and whether it has led to different methods of engagement with the public. In conjunction with a literature review of both the specific libraries and the wider context of community-managed libraries, structured research visits were made to each of the libraries to evaluate experiential qualities including their provision and location. Studying changes in one local authority also facilitates an understanding of the impact of library transfers on the overall coherency of library provision.

Background and context

The concept of the community library, and of the community a library serves being involved in its running, are not new. For example, volunteers made a significant contribution to rural library provision in the middle of the twentieth century (Cavanagh, 2017). Black and Muddiman (1997) write about the rise of community librarianship during the 1970s, and reaching its zenith in the 1980s, which was characterised by proactive engagement with, and response to the needs of, everyone – but in particular those that would otherwise be unlikely to use a library's services. Aiming for decentralisation and an element of community control, methods included: working closely with users and local people, outreach, increased responsiveness, and working with independent community agencies and the voluntary sector (Black and Muddiman, 1997, pp. 53-65). Interestingly, these initiatives also occurred during a time of local authority spending cuts. Whilst the term was also used synonymously for a branch library, McKee (1989) points out that the distinction between the branch library, which is already geographically decentralised, and the community library is a decentralisation of its management, to provide sufficient autonomy to enable a responsive approach to meeting need as well as expressed demand.

Although reference to a new conception of the community-managed library as a delivery model emerged slightly earlier (Cavanagh, 2017), it was deep cuts to public spending initiated by the coalition government in 2010, and the subsequent era of austerity, that created a political ideology where the term has been appropriated in a very different guise. An ideology under which local authorities have been actively encouraged to adopt alternative models of library provision, whilst having their hand forced through lack of funding. An ideology that can generate divisiveness in the very community it is meant to serve (Anstice, 2014). A study by the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI, 2013) suggests that policymakers increasingly perceive the community-run model as an appropriate vehicle for delivering library services.

It is estimated that public libraries in the UK suffered a 14 percent reduction in total net expenditure across the five years to 2016, including a £25m budget reduction during the latter twelve months (Kean, 2016). In Liverpool, where this study is set, the library service has delivered approximately £3m in savings across the five years to 2017 (LATG, 2017). Between 2010 and 2016 343 UK libraries closed, of which 207 were static libraries (BBC, 2016). At the same time, community-managed libraries have been increasing rapidly (Cavanagh, 2017); 174 libraries were transferred to community groups between 2010 and 2016 and 50 were outsourced to external organisations (BBC, 2016).

According to Axiell UK (2017), as of February 2017 over 10 percent of public libraries were volunteer-run.

The term 'community library' is used to describe a range of different models including: community-supported (but still managed and funded by the local authority), community-managed, and independent (DCMS, 2016b). Arguments supporting community- and volunteer-managed libraries include: greater community involvement, increased take-up of library services, and service innovation and diversification; those against include the notion that well-managed community libraries may result in more being transferred, leading to a greater fragmentation of library services, and the loss of key professional skills (Anstice, n.d.).

Qualmann (2017) argues that government funding cuts have resulted in widespread disregard by local authorities of their statutory duty to provide a comprehensive library service. Under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act (HMSO, 1964) it is the duty of every authority in England and Wales, "to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons". However, as Findlay-King *et al.* (2017) point out, not only is the term "comprehensive" undefined – a view echoed by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP, 2014) – it only applies to the overall local authority area.

An evaluation of community-managed libraries

To explore the impacts of library transfer, an evaluation has been made of each library moved out of direct city council control within one UK local authority area. Focusing on transfers within a coherent locality enables meaningful comparisons to made between, for example, the services available and the outcomes achieved by different libraries, and the characteristics of each stakeholder. It also facilitates a clear understanding of the extent to which transfer has affected the balance of provision between libraries managed by the city council and those managed by other agencies within the area to which the statutory duty applies. Furthermore, trends observed in the overall provision across one local authority may be pertinent in the wider context of others.

The literature review focused on identifying information and data published regarding each library, including about their transfer and the managing organisation. A series of structured fact-finding visits were then made to each of the libraries, the criteria for which were to: record the facilities and services offered, including some that were not listed on their website or identified in the literature; observe how spaces were being utilised; appraise their location within the community; and identify their presence within co-located facilities. These research visits were supported by informal discussions with library staff and managers. Ethical approval was secured for structured interviews with library staff; however, these could not be arranged consistently across all five libraries and so there was insufficient parity to pursue that method. A broader literature review studied community-managed libraries more generally, as well as UK library policy. It must be recognised that the latter sources are often government funded; Anstice (2018) highlights that these are therefore unlikely to contradict measures that facilitate austerity, such as public libraries being increasingly managed by independent bodies.

Since 2010, five of Liverpool city council's libraries have been transferred out of public sector control and are now operated by community organisations; an additional three libraries have closed (Anstice, n.d.; LATG, 2017). Put into context, this means that almost one-third of the 18 branch libraries listed on the city council's website have been moved out of its direct control. At one stage it was thought that a further four were under threat of closure by 2019 (Kean, 2017); these were safeguarded after the city council secured an extra £27m for its beleaguered social care sector (Thorp, 2017). However, the transfer of a further two libraries to community organisations is still being considered (LATG, 2017).

Croxteth Community Library

Croxteth Library was transferred from council control in 2010. It was the first community-managed library operating in the local authority and is run by the Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT) – a community anchor organisation (CAO) established in 1983 as an educational charity. CAOs are independent, community-led organisations that provide a long-term focal point for local communities, and for community organisations and services, and often are responsible for managing their own assets. The library remains part of the council's statutory provision and benefits from capped funding, two members of staff (employed by the Trust) and volunteer support. The library is a welcoming, brightly lit space, and offers a traditional range of services including: lending materials; book groups; adult reading classes; help with financial services; free access to and support for using the Internet and inter-library loans enabling access to the city council's book stock. The library moved from the adjacent building to be co-located within AVCT's 'Communiversity', an existing centre established to provide lifelong learning.

On becoming a community library there was a significant uplift in use, with loans rising from 30 to 130 books per day and increased opening hours (Locality, 2012). Prior to transfer, the library had been a target for anti-social behaviour which had necessitated security guards at the door (Belger, 2014). Now run by local people, the library's new links to the community through family and social networks have enabled it to address anti-social behaviour more effectively and made the building a more welcoming place. Its co-location with the lifelong learning centre also increased potential visits through higher footfall (Locality, 2012). A key factor cited in the success of the library was the mutual commitment to a supportive working partnership with the city council, which included providing professional support and expertise when required, access to inter-library loans, and replenishing book stock (Locality, 2012).

Breck Road and Dovecot Community Libraries

Following the success of Croxteth Community Library, in 2014 AVCT was approached by Liverpool's city council to submit an expression of interest for Breck Road and Dovecot libraries. Unlike Croxteth, which as a commissioned service has an allocated book fund, both Breck Road and Dovecot are independent from the city council and AVCT is responsible for replenishing books at these sites (Power to Change, n.d.). Breck Road Library's location in the middle of the high street gives it a strong presence within its community, unlike Dovecot which is located behind a parade of

shops and is much less visible. Dovecot Library is based within a Multi-Activities Centre which was taken over by AVCT in 2015. It is therefore part of a wider collection of services that include: a children's day nursery, gym, adult education classes and coached sports sessions. Both libraries offer a traditional range of services, such as print and audio books, computer and printing facilities, free Internet access and a children's area.

Fazakerley Community Library

Fazakerley's library was taken over from direct city council control in 2016 and is now managed by the Fazakerley Community Federation. Since taking over, the Federation has adapted and changed the layout of the library for the benefit of the community (Livewell, 2018). The library is co-located with the Federation's other buildings, which offer a range of activities and services to the local community including: skills, welfare and housing advice and exercise classes. Within one main space, the library offers a traditional range of services such as print and audio books, computer and printing facilities, free Internet access and a children's area. There is also an outdoor garden space for patrons to use. The library offers a wide range of groups and clubs such as: photography, creative writing, knitting, breakfast club, women's group, art classes, jewellery club, history and genealogy group, book club, IT club, and a community choir. Libraries are being encouraged to complement the work of formal learning providers (Libraries Taskforce, 2016); it is therefore notable that the Library includes a children's after-school club throughout the week. Significantly, opening hours have increased, and the library is now open on Saturdays, and has an increasing number of members.

Walton Life Rooms

Higgs *et al.* (2017) argue that public libraries have become central to addressing health and social well-being agendas at the local community level. Walton Library was taken over by the local NHS Trust health authority in 2016 after it became available as part of the city council's reduction in library services and was transformed into a new centre for learning, recovery, health and wellbeing (Mersey Care, 2016). The building was sensitively refurbished following its transfer and provides attractive, well-lit spaces that hum with activity.

Renamed Walton Life Rooms, in addition to library services the provision has been diversified in a way that aims to challenge stigma and promote positive mental health and wellbeing. It offers: an employment and enterprise hub; a library for health and wellbeing and local history, learning, literature and poetry; a children's and schools' library area; classrooms for courses and workshops; meeting spaces for community groups; a free IT and media suite; an area for art exhibitions and cultural activities; a café; and a gardening group and 'life garden'. Indeed, what might have traditionally been considered the library elements of the programme are now a small part of the overall provision. The Life Rooms see themselves as central to building, developing and extending links into the community. Paramount to the refurbishment was a belief in Carnegie's vision that a beautiful building lifts people's spirits, and in creating a therapeutic environment that people want to visit, making them feel both welcomed and valued (Mersey Care, 2016). Mersey Care has built on the success of Walton Life Rooms by opening a second facility in Southport; funding has also been

secured for a third Life Rooms to be opened in Bootle in partnership with a local college (although neither are former libraries).

Discussion

Library services and community responsiveness

Both CILIP (2014) and the DCMS (2014) maintain that the public library service is required as much as ever, but there is a need to re-establish its role in society. It is suggested that threats to public libraries emerge when their activities fail to keep up with the services needed in the local society (Michnik, 2014), and supporting a wider scope of services will become increasingly significant (Mehra and Davis, 2015). Liverpool's Library Advisory Task Group (LAGT, 2017, p. 12) argues that its libraries need to develop their own "personalities", in respect of "the people, place, make-up and needs of the local community".

Walton Life Rooms is significant in this respect. More than a library, this is a centre for learning, recovery, health and wellbeing; its programme has been substantially augmented, and a diverse range of activities and learning opportunities are timetabled throughout each day. Cavanagh (2017) found significant variation in the services offered by community libraries; some that might be expected – such as inter-library loans and newspapers – were not available in a substantial proportion, whereas some community libraries had significant diversification in their provision such as film nights, knitting and poetry workshops. Similarly, at Fazakerley Community Library a myriad programme of activities includes photography, a jewellery club and even a community choir. Just as rich diversification has been achieved in some local authority libraries, this could be indicative of a trend away from services traditionally perceived as part of the library toward much more innovative provision.

However, the NFWI (2013) study demonstrates that not only can the community-managed model enable a library's services to be tailored to the needs of the community, but that it can adapt more quickly because it faces less bureaucracy than it would under public control; volunteers explained how being a part of the community meant they were often able to provide a more personal service. Fenwick and Gibbon (2016) identify the third sector – a terrain outside of direct public or private control – to be distinctive in its sensitivity and closeness to users. One of the reasons cited for the success of Croxteth Community Library was its openness to, and extensive connections with, the local community which is achieved both formally through the managing organisation and informally through staff and volunteers; for example, one member of staff had previously taught at local schools and so knew many of the users (Belger, 2014; Locality, 2012). Arguably, this deeper community involvement has been a key factor in facilitating the library's responsiveness to its community and its ability to engage users in the design of its services.

The NFWI (2013) study cautions that community libraries may focus on attracting the most common user groups, however, and in so doing fail to reach more marginalised elements of the community. Further, because volunteers are more likely to come from particular demographic profiles, other sections of the community with less capacity to articulate their needs will not see them met. It is

crucial that measures are taken to ensure that libraries are "as diverse as the people in the neighbourhoods for which they serve" (Mason, 2017).

Support for community-managed libraries

The Libraries Taskforce published guidelines for supporting libraries managed by community organisations (DCMS, 2016b). Significantly, Liverpool city council was already following these principles, including the provision of training and ongoing professional advice, access to the online catalogue and inter-library circulation to all libraries, as well as a single membership scheme (LATG, 2017). Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, another key factor cited in the success of Croxteth Community Library has been the mutual commitment to a supportive partnership with the city council (Locality, 2012).

This is not always the case, however. The NFWI (2013) study found that the level of local authority support for community libraries varied from comprehensive to virtually non-existent; for the most part respondents seemed dissatisfied with what they were offered. CILIP (2014) has voiced concern that even in community-managed libraries that are part of the statutory service and supported by the council, full local authority library provision was not available. The Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee (CMSC, 2012) argues that local authority support should include: assistance from professional library staff, access to new and existing stock, and IT equipment and support. It asserts that withholding such could be construed as closures by stealth, and that without access to trained staff community-managed facilities could not be considered part of the public library network.

Another factor in the success of the Croxteth Community Library was the experience and entrepreneurship of the managing organisation (Belger, 2014). With a background in providing adult education, training and community and cultural activities, AVCT had existing organisational capacity, previous experience of working with the community, managing buildings and different funding streams, and delivering services to the public (Locality, 2012). The experience of the managing organisation has also been a contributory factor in the success of the Walton Life Rooms, which were taken over by the local NHS Trust health authority, and Fazakerley Library's management by the established Community Federation. It is reasonable to conclude that where the managing organisation has significant, relevant and diverse expertise, it will need less support and is more likely to excel.

One of the arguments against the transfer of libraries out of local authority control is that a well-managed community library may result in more being transferred. Significantly, based on their success with Croxteth Community Library AVCT was approached by Liverpool city council to submit an expression of interest for Breck Road and Dovecot Libraries, which were facing closure as part of the council's 2014 consultation on the future of over half of its libraries (Power to Change, n.d.). Curiously, the degree of support from the city council varies across AVCT's three libraries; as a commissioned service Croxteth Community Library has an allocated book fund, whereas both Breck Road and Dovecot are independent from the council and AVCT is responsible for replenishing books (Power to Change, n.d.). The irony being that the successful aversion of one library closure precipitates further transfers from public provision, and – furthermore – that the level of support can even vary between these. Indeed, the success of volunteer-run libraries being a catalyst for

more has occurred elsewhere (Anstice 2014; Cavanagh, 2017). The underlying cause is, of course, the continued squeeze on public spending due to austerity. Therefore, whilst community-managed libraries have proved a viable, in some cases thriving, short-term solution, the longer-term impact on the overall landscape of library provision is much less clear.

Access to technology

Libraries have always played a key role in providing access to technology; crucially in this respect, the digital divide has not disappeared despite the increasing prevalence of digital devices. For example, only recently one in ten households in the UK did not have Internet access (Libraries Taskforce, 2016). Similarly, the Good Things Foundation (2017) estimated that almost 20 percent of the UK population lack basic digital skills, and highlight that people without these skills are more likely to experience factors relating to social exclusion. Furthermore, the digital divide now also concerns those who don't have the means or understanding to maintain their access.

An increasing proportion of our lives takes place online and libraries are crucial to the accessibility of Wi-Fi, computers and other electronic devices, as well as support and training. They should enable a broader demographic to lead digitally literate lives (DCMS, 2014; Libraries Taskforce, 2016). However, Cavanagh (2017) found that almost half of community libraries charged for Internet access. In Liverpool, all libraries – including the five operated by community organisations – offer access to computers and free public Wi-Fi. The latter was paid for through government grant funding which, although libraries operated by community organisations could not apply for directly, Liverpool city council obtained on behalf of all libraries across the city – both council managed and community operated; funding was also secured to extend code clubs across community libraries (LATG, 2017).

Defining library 'use' and co-location

As library services change, so too does the concept of how 'use' is defined and measured; this also reflects the changing ways in which those they serve value libraries. For example, one study (Aabø and Audunson, 2012) revealed the majority of visitors did not borrow or return materials but used the public library as a space for other activities. McCahill *et al*. (2018) highlight that with lending becoming less prevalent amid diversifying services and remote access, use becomes more challenging to quantify. The DCMS (2017) cultural engagement survey shows a steady decline in those using public libraries over the last decade; here the term includes any use of a public library service (such as borrowing books, printing documents or taking part in a reading group) including via remote communication, using on-line library resources, and receipt of an outreach service.

It has been argued that limited opening times are detrimental to engagement (Axiell UK, 2017), and McCahill *et al*. (2018) demonstrate the deleterious impact reduced opening hours has on perceived library use. It is notable, therefore, that the AVCT libraries have extended their opening times since those quoted in a DCMS (2016a) meta-study of library provision, thus improving accessibility. Fazakerley has also increased its hours, is now open on Saturdays, and has an increasing number of members. Croxteth Library has also shown a significant increase in loans. In summary, the different

ways in which Liverpool's community-managed libraries have increased 'use' encompasses loans, visits, membership and opening hours.

Co-location of libraries is also not new. Before the nineteenth century, for example, they were often in the same building as a museum. Similarly, during the development of poly-purpose cultural centres in the 1960s, the library formed a key component of an educational or recreational complex (Black and Muddiman, 1997). However, it is notable that four of the five libraries in this study are co-located. These include location with: a centre established to provide lifelong learning; a multi-activity centre with nursery, sports and education facilities; a complex offering skills, welfare and housing advice, and exercise classes; and facilities to promote mental health and wellbeing. Such co-location is significant because it has numerous potential benefits, such as: facilitating longer opening hours, increasing footfall through the complex, and the cross-pollination of visitors between different functions.

Concluding thoughts

Following transfer, Liverpool's community-managed libraries have shown improvements to their use and services – as measured by increased physical visits, more books loans, longer opening which improves accessibility, and diversification of activities – and become thriving alternatives to libraries that would otherwise very likely have closed. Great caution would be needed before applying these findings more broadly, not least due to the particularities of context, however common characteristics can be identified:

- all the managing organisations received a significant level of local authority support, although this has varied between libraries;
- some funding has only been secured through the close working relationship between each library's new management organisation and the local authority;
- all five libraries are managed by organisations that had extensive prior experience of providing services to the public, and of facilities management;
- four of the five are co-located, which has the potential to facilitate longer opening hours, increased footfall and cross-pollination of users;
- the managing organisations have built on extensive existing knowledge and established relationships with their community.

Black and Muddimam (1991, p. 4) suggest that a scenario of deinstitutionalisation – a diffusion of the library into the community in which information needs are satisfied by the community themselves, aided by guidance and resources from library authorities – is a radical one and rarely seen. Arguably, the achievements in some of Liverpool's community libraries do echo this description. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that these could only have been realised through community-managed status. That initiatives such as community libraries, co-location, engagement and outreach have previously been implemented successfully under local authority management demonstrates that transfer is not a prerequisite, and therefore is not reason in itself to supplant public libraries with community-managed ones. However, the conditions and freedom afforded by being outside of local authority control, in conjunction with the closeness to the

community that this offers in terms of sensitivity and responsiveness to local needs, may make them more easy to achieve.

What is different from the rise of community librarianship in the 1970s is that these strategies, adopted in response to austerity, have been much more actively promoted as alternatives to reduced service provision or closure. On the one hand, this new mode of thinking by politicians and local authorities has facilitated a devolution of control which though championed in the 1970s largely failed to gain traction (Black and Muddiman, 1997, p. 146). On the other, it has created a situation in which a once coherent network is now managed by a multitude of stakeholders. It is significant, if not disconcerting, that within less than a decade almost one-third of libraries within this local authority have moved outside of its direct control. Whilst individual library services may have improved, it is accompanied by increased fragmentation in the coherency of the library network at a larger scale; furthermore, success has led to more widespread application of the model. The credible threat this presents is to further undermine the unity of the library network, with provision spread across a number of different stakeholders acting independently from each other, and differing levels of local authority support even for libraries managed by the same stakeholder. Whereas, at the turn of this century, Proctor *et al*. (1998) highlighted the need for policymakers to protect local libraries to prevent the community from becoming disenfranchised, this demonstrates their potential to exacerbate the postcode lottery of library provision that Cavanagh (2017, p. 234) describes as "a potent cocktail of inconsistent practice".

For this reason, evaluating community libraries should consider their collective impact on the wider context of library provision across the region in which they are located, as well as their individual successes or failures, and evidences the value of studying community library provision across local authority areas. Liverpool shows that community-managed libraries can offer many positive outcomes and make significant contributions to their neighbourhoods. However, they should not be perceived as a panacea for sustaining libraries in the context of diminishing state support. Furthermore, rather than a patchwork, different models of library provision must form a carefully woven tapestry in which each thread contributes to a thoughtfully managed bigger picture.

Whilst numerous concerns have been raised over transferring libraries to community organisations or the private sector, one aspect that is under-explored in the literature is its impact on the public realm. Moran (2012) has described libraries as the only sheltered public spaces where people are citizens as opposed to consumers. Similarly, Black (2011) recounts how the public library has been conceptualised as an indoor public square – a democratic, inclusive place that is open to the whole community. When libraries are transferred out of local authority control – and particularly if they are outsourced to the private sector, as has occurred in some London boroughs – then they lose their status as a public space, and consequently the community loses part of its public realm. Whilst increased opening hours are to be welcomed in this respect, facilitating improved access to these places, even transfer to community-managed organisations represents a fragmentation of already diminishing truly 'public' spaces. This facet of a broader trend in the privatisation of the public realm is one that would benefit from further study.

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