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Forbes, D., Findlay-King, L., Macfadyen, G. et al. (1 more author) (2017) From public to volunteer library provision in the UK: lesson to be learnt – one size does not fit all. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 8 (3). pp. 343-353. ISSN 2040-8056

<https://doi.org/10.1332/204080517X15072789482055>

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in *Voluntary Sector Review*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version, Forbes, D. et al, *From public to volunteer library provision in the UK: lesson to be learnt – one size does not fit all*, *Voluntary Sector Review*, Volume 8, Number 3, November 2017, pp. 343-353(11) is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/204080517X15072789482055>

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From public to volunteer library provision in the UK: lesson to be learnt – one size does not fit all

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This paper reports on research findings on the transfer of public library services to volunteer delivery in the UK between 2014 and 2016, as a result of austerity and budget cuts by local government. The research asked two key questions: are libraries sustainable after their transfer and what lessons can be learnt from these transfers that will ensure success and sustainability? Initial findings indicate that cases in different locations vary and that 'one size does not fit all'.

key words library • volunteers • asset transfer • sustainability

Introduction

The effect of UK government budget reductions of £53 billion between 2010 and 2015 led to an examination at local-government level of all the services provided, and resulted in authority retrenchment and efficiency strategies (Hastings et al, 2015). One of these strategies has been the increasing use of volunteers in public service delivery. The use of volunteers is not a new phenomenon (Buddery, 2015): the third sector has a history of co-delivering services with local and national government. For example, in health and emergency services, and education, the number of volunteers has been estimated at several million (Hill, 2015). In public libraries in the UK, volunteer contributions are more recent.

The effect of budget cuts on libraries resulted in 242 library closures in the UK between 2011 and 2016, with 100 being taken over by volunteer groups or social enterprises (Anstice, 2017), and an estimated 112% increase in the number of volunteers involved in the provision between 2008/09 and 2012/13 (CIPFA, 2013). Etherington (2017) has argued that '[w]e need a national debate about the role of volunteering in the future of our public services', illustrating the timely nature of this study of the transfer of library services to volunteer groups.

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires local authorities to deliver 'comprehensive' library provision; however, interpretation of the word 'comprehensive' is ambiguous. In addition, libraries often have high local political profiles, meaning that councillors may be very reluctant to approve a closure in their own areas and responsive to campaigning groups. A key constraint to sustainability may be a library's ability to raise income by charging for services. Any such revenue is very limited, as traditionally books are freely lent and there are minimal opportunities for income generation through charging for other services. Balanced against this limitation is the fact that local libraries share a strong sense of community ownership – many have existed for several generations as both a service and a physical building.

It is this sense of community ownership that seems to have attracted and motivated powerful voluntary action around libraries and it is important to explore what underlies this.

Volunteering has strong links to ideas of association and social capital, with the latter's emphasis on mutual cooperation, reciprocity and networking (Nichols et al, 2015). The use of the concept of 'social capital' has become increasingly popular in UK policy making and academic discourse, and pertinently to explain volunteering (in the founding work of Putnam, 1995, and in many research applications since, for example Brown and Ferris, 2007). The concept is multifaceted (Wang and Graddy, 2008) and has a variety of definitions. Underpinning these are the works of Bourdieu (1980) and Putnam (1995). Social capital is said to be a force for the individual and collective good; it helps to connect people through networks, with reciprocity and trust being two of the main ingredients. According to Putnam (1995: 67), a social organisation has 'networks, norms, and trust that facilitate co-ordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'. Behind this coming together are drivers that may be based on a rational assessment of the benefits of cooperation, on social norms of behaviour or on strong emotional motivations (Petersen et al, 2009).

In the case of volunteers in libraries, individuals are driven by an emotional attachment and are motivated to cooperate to achieve common goals (Petersen et al, 2009). This can be initiated by their existing association as a 'friend' of the library group. As they associate to attain some purpose or govern some activity defined by them as important to their interests, trust builds (Hirst, 1994). The social networks in libraries could be said to reflect bridging networks, consisting of individuals who are involved in civic engagement and a common cause, who through face-to-face contact build the network and a sense of connection. According to Griffis and Johnson (2014), a community with high levels of social capital is likely to achieve high social cohesion and will work towards common goals. This appears to be demonstrated in volunteered libraries: they are mutual-aid, self-help organisations, 'the product of people's ability to work together to meet shared needs and address common problems' (Lyons et al, 1998: 52) and an expression of active citizenship. However, for libraries transferring to voluntary groups, does the required level of social capital for sustainability exist? Is it dependent on additional factors such as the location of the libraries? Deprived communities may not have adequate social capital resources to provide services or attract ongoing volunteer support (Hall, 2011). Therefore, reliance on social capital can create a situation where people are excluded from networks (Portes, 1998), raising the question of whether it can be developed to ensure sustainability. These issues are explored in the rest of this paper.

Research project

The findings discussed in the next section are part of a research project that commenced in 2014 to identify and gain insight into the changes in library provision that had developed as a result of changes in government funding. From this research, two local authorities were identified that had been hard hit by economic austerity, requiring appropriate responses, and agreed to take part in the research. The two conurbations are situated in the North West and North East of England. The findings appear to reflect common issues faced by areas in the 'Northern Powerhouse': both conurbations have service-based economies with major employers in the public sector and higher education institutions with diverse multicultural populations.

Participants were selected through an initial email to the libraries in the local authority areas for the attention of either the library committee or trustees. This resulted in nine trustee and 10 volunteer interviews taking place at nine libraries. In addition, contact was made through emails with four representatives of local government and two support organisations in the areas.

Questions explored by the research included:

- What were the catalysts and process for transfer?
- Who volunteers?
- What difference has the transfer of management to volunteers made to service provision and responsiveness to local needs?
- What are the lessons learnt for successful transfer?

Findings

What were the catalysts and process for transfer?

In most of our cases, the catalyst for change was the UK government's 2010 Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010), with its reduction in central government funding to local areas and its budget deficit reduction targets. In one local government area, the catalyst happened earlier in 2006, when the library service itself was seen to be failing. For another area, the catalyst was slightly different: the use of volunteers enabled a library to remain open for two hours in the evening, where a volunteer was present alongside a librarian to ensure that the librarian was not in the building alone. This enabled the librarian's hours to be rearranged so that they could keep the library open for a period at the weekend.

The process of transfer to volunteers often involved a campaigning group (sometimes developing from an existing library friends group), voicing the opinions of the local and wider communities and stakeholders.

Faced with closures, councils instigated a variety of mechanisms to garner local opinion: public meetings were a popular choice, in varying venues including church halls, schools and local community centres. Consultations and public meetings were attended by significant numbers of people from local communities. In one case, over 200 attended such a meeting, while in another, "the response [to potential closure] was vociferous" (trustee). In some instances working groups were established to draw up business plans and proposals for saving the service.

Support provided for the transfer process was valuable to volunteer groups but varied across cases. In one area, a community library development officer was appointed for five years as a pilot project. The officer's role was to try to develop volunteering capacity and establish new groups. It was recognised that this task was more difficult in less advantaged socioeconomic areas and more support was required in these areas. In another library, expertise and advice were provided by a volunteer support organisation after the initial friends group had formed. This support included choosing and applying for an appropriate legal entity, which would have been extremely time- and energy-consuming for volunteers if they had had to do it themselves. It was a process complicated by the inconsistent approach of the Charity Commission. The time donated by the Volunteer support group well exceeded that allocated in the budget.

A common theme was the unwelcome speed of transfer. For example, in one library, once the volunteers had been informed that they were accepted by the council as a group to manage the library, they had three months to prepare a business plan to cover the next three years. Study participants suggested that the local government had apparently delayed grasping the awkward political nettle of asset transfer – the replacement of paid staff with volunteers – which had meant that the process, once started, had to take place rapidly. However, such haste gave little time to develop volunteering capacity, especially in areas where it is needed.

Who volunteers?

The study found that most of the volunteers were characterised by high stocks of human capital (a pool of relevant skills), a sense of efficacy, and a strong sense of community and identification with the library facility.

Several had backgrounds in the library service and non-retired volunteers included an accountant, a project manager, academics and community workers. As one trustee stated: "We have a number of different people running, if you like, specific aspects of the business."

Several of the members and trustees of the libraries were volunteers and trustees of other voluntary organisations (such as a community leisure facility or a community church group), and thus had other relevant experience.

Parents of library users were also a source of volunteers. In one case the chair of trustees had brought his children to the library. Children were often accompanied by parents after school. Volunteers were also from those who had an interest or hobby that closely aligned with the facility. The library was a place where generations of local people had borrowed books and continued to do so. A relatively stable local population pool, from which to draw volunteers, was equally important: few volunteers lived outside the area and travelled in; most were within walking distance or could access the facility through public transport. Proximity to a college or university meant that student volunteers were available but often only for one-off or episodic volunteering, where their focus was on improvements to the CV (curriculum vitae) or short-term projects.

The availability and diversity of volunteers made preparing and managing the volunteer rota a time-consuming and full-time volunteer role. Varying methods to manage this role were used. For example, a sign-up list displayed in the office worked for one group but could leave gaps in provision. For another group, once a volunteer

rota was published, the session leader was responsible for ensuring that all volunteers attended, which could be stressful.

In all the cases, the main motivation among volunteers was initially to save their local library provision. In the words of one library trustee: “Our energies were really just thinking about ourselves as campaign groups.” As a local and physical facility, used for generations, the libraries were able to attract sentiments one might not expect of a public service without such features. It is hard to imagine the same public sentiments being attached to traffic or dog wardens!

However, another observation was that volunteers who campaigned to avoid closure did not necessarily then become active volunteers in managing the library: some saw themselves first as campaigners, and a successful campaign was their end-game; others did not want to commit to volunteering on a regular basis or in a library. However, this departure of campaigners resulted in the loss of skills and knowledge and potentially threatened sustainability.

What difference has the transfer of management to volunteers made to service provision and responsiveness to local needs?

There was no common model of asset transfer and subsequent delivery but, in general, after transfer, the libraries made efforts to be seen as both more market and community oriented. In some cases, this resulted in tensions between the need to survive by generating income and the need to remain close to their mission and user requirements. Through self-governance they had the ability to define their mission and set the direction of the organisation, as well as to become more visible locally: “We always had the vision of it being a community hub” (library trustee).

An analysis of the organisations’ websites indicates some common themes, which stress the direction, aspirations and, more importantly, the involvement and power of the local community. The statements below offer examples:

[The library] serves the public in the district and its surrounding area, by providing a community lending library and associated services. We are doing this by associating together residents, local authorities, voluntary and other organisations, in a common effort to provide facilities in the interests of social welfare for recreation and leisure-time occupation with the object of improving the conditions of life for the residents. (Library website)

[W]e have extended its activities in line with the suggestions of local residents, turning the library into a community hub, enjoyed by all ages. (Library website)

Post transfer, at an operational level, the trustees and volunteers demonstrated a clear awareness of local needs, and research undertaken by the libraries enabled them to review current facilities and elicit local opinion. With control over pricing and programming, their knowledge and understanding of their local communities enabled them to be sensitive and responsive to their market and local needs.

Aspirations for the future included expanding the offer and increasing its accessibility to people in the local neighbourhood, including specific community groups and users, such as local schools and unemployed people. For example, in several cases, library

services and opening hours were reviewed. New services and facilities included a jigsaw corner, additional computer terminals, coffee machines, café areas, craft clubs and visiting speakers. The results of such developments were epitomised by statements such as: “The place is buzzing now with activities” (volunteer) and “We want to run lots of projects from it that get the community really involved so that its open seven days a week with lots of activities in there” (director of a volunteer support service).

Expanding and diversifying the service seemed to fulfil two related objectives. The resulting service became more responsive to community needs (the term ‘community hub’ was often used) and, consequently, more users were attracted. This increased usage, in turn, developed the sense of ownership of the facility that was required to recruit more volunteers in the future. One library group talked about attracting new groups: “We should have a games club, educational games club maybe, and develop activities where older people and younger people can swap skills. So whether it’s computing, whether it’s craft based – getting them interested” (chair).

Groups identified financial management, through income generation and cost control, as essential for sustainability. In some cases, there was transitional funding from the local council; in others, groups had to be self-supporting from the day of transfer. Typically, libraries had minimal earned income. “There is a need to pay basic bills before we buy books” (volunteer). Some assessed that expenditure could be reduced by simple efficiencies that could be put in place because of the flexibility of local management and the imperative to save any unnecessary costs. There were examples of volunteers taking over cleaning and maintenance duties and savings made on utilities such as gas and electricity.

Overall, participants described how service provision under volunteers could be more effective and efficient because they were more ‘hands-on’. The lack of council bureaucracy, which could, for example, see a request for new stock taking months to appear, improved processes since the volunteer library could order online for next-day delivery.

What are the lessons learnt for successful transfer?

The following implications for practice were identified by the participants.

Volunteers needing to be flexible

Participants identified that an important principle for managing the evolving situation and changes successfully was that volunteers needed to remain flexible. Volunteer groups recognised the rapid pace of change, and that councils often had unclear or ill-informed plans. The process was at best flexible, with “moving goalposts”.

“Thinking on their feet”

Volunteer steering groups had to “think on their feet”, and ensure that groups had regular meetings and robust communication methods, and kept accurate records.

Creating a smaller steering group

After the initial publicity and movement from a campaigning group to a working group, creating a smaller steering group of volunteers enabled a degree of control to be maintained, particularly in the early stages of business planning. Numbers varied as to what worked for such steering groups, three to six members being manageable.

Reflecting community needs

Business plans needed to reflect genuine needs, not just the perceived needs identified by the volunteer steering group or committee. Avoiding a silo mentality or elitist group of committee members was mentioned.

Holding regular public meetings

Regular public meetings were important to inform and to obtain local residents' views on the library service they required. These meetings needed to be held locally and involve users and non-users, and were seen as instrumental in sustaining interest and action, and in recruiting a volunteer pool. Mechanisms for communication included meetings held in the locality, newsletters, instigating or utilising friends groups, social media and web pages.

Networking with various stakeholders

Networking underpinned the process of transfer and delivery, providing opportunities for guidance and support. Examples included:

- attending local councillor surgeries and inviting councillors to public meetings, thus encouraging them to be advocates for the library;
- fully utilising the existing voluntary support services groups in the early stages of transfer or during the process of change – these groups were invaluable for giving advice on organisational structures and charitable status and delivering workshops on governance and policy writing.

Networking with other community libraries

A valuable resource was contact with libraries that had already gone through the transfer process, enabling them to share experiences and talk through problems. There were also examples of committee members informally contacting other libraries outside the area that had been through transfer.

Developing a local library support group

Volunteer libraries developed local support groups either formally or informally. For one library, a council employee acted as a facilitator, initiating and supporting the process and providing a forum where best practice and problems could be shared. However, meetings did not follow a council-led agenda, allowing for greater flexibility.

Council support in the transition process

Where funding allowed, a dedicated council employee to support the transition process was perceived as invaluable. The person in this role had to be knowledgeable and proactive, and their responsibilities had to be clearly defined. Such responsibilities included:

- coordinating the groups;
- offering training on management systems;
- providing advice on the transfer process;
- acting as a facilitator;
- helping to negotiate through the complex discussions and decision making.

After transfer, the role would change to one of responding to ad-hoc enquiries, on topics such as people development.

Developing policies and procedures for volunteer management

Policies and procedures for recruiting, motivating and retaining volunteers – during and after the transition – were required for sustainability. To survive in the long term, the transferred libraries needed a pool of volunteers, and hence the role of the volunteer coordinator was vital but demanding, and a deputy or role-share was important for success. Therefore, succession planning also needed to be addressed by the libraries, particularly as some volunteers adopted multiple roles, and there was some evidence of burnout.

Knowledge and understanding of delivering a library service

Knowledge and understanding of delivering a library service was an essential requirement from the beginning of the process. For some libraries this was a steep learning curve, with very little evidence of policies and practice being transferred along with the library. Several libraries were fortunate in that they had retired librarians or ex-librarians as volunteers.

Council support during the handover

Two initiatives from the council were often cited as helpful:

- a *handover period* providing opportunities to be in a library to shadow library staff – proper induction was often not feasible as many librarians were being redeployed or made redundant;
- a *manual* that detailed essential library procedures, frequently asked questions and the location of key service details (such as electrical points) – such a manual helped (or would have helped) in managing the day-to-day running of the library (those documents that were available were variable in depth and detail).

Conclusions

The library case studies examined have demonstrated that volunteers are emerging to save library services and take on the role of delivering them. All examples showed a genuine transfer of power to the community groups, evidenced through strategic and operational control. The cases reveal that a business and entrepreneurial focus is evolving – in particular to develop multiple income streams – but is aligned with a genuine desire to engage and serve local communities. A cautionary note may be that this element could be lost if libraries become overly profit oriented and marketised to become economically viable, in seeking to achieve sustainability.

We found that asset transfer in these library cases is being led by a core of committed volunteers. Within this core there needs to be those with high levels of social capital (such as knowledge, experience, confidence, efficacy and skills) or those with a willingness to acquire them. However, this may not be happening in all cases. Paying attention to these issues rather than prioritising entrepreneurial activities may offer alternative paths to sustainability.

Once a group has expressed an interest, the work to be done to effect the transfer of assets is rapid, intensive and challenging from the perspective of the volunteers. This raises the question of whether such transfers will only be viable in areas where there is substantial social capital, leaving others with no local library service.

The volunteers are motivated by localism, rather than wider regional concerns – willing to volunteer at the local library but unlikely to travel outside the area to another library. This mindset is perhaps understandable as all their time and energy has been focused on their own facility. Some groups had obtained helpful advice from other libraries that had already transferred, suggesting that once established, volunteers will be prepared to give time to share expectations and provide guidance to others. Support services and portals are emerging – for example, the Community Library Peer Network supported by Locality – and information on these needs to be shared more widely.

A key threat to sustainability is that volunteers who campaigned against closure of a library did not necessarily become active volunteers in managing the library. The need to recruit and retain appropriate volunteers is challenging and ongoing. A particularly demanding role is that of a trustee or member of a management committee, with specific inherent burdens. Several in those roles were already experiencing burnout, and thus succession planning is also a key issue that needs to be addressed.

Having a 'how-to' handbook or go-to website was cited as something that would have been useful. However, for libraries, 'one size does not fit all', and there are different models emerging in different localities. Despite some common issues identified in this paper, each library case varied with its needs and success dependent on its location, access to volunteers and related resource networks.

This paper is an exploration of the practical implications of our research. In earlier work on library asset transfer, we considered the nature of such transfers to be a form of associative democracy (Nichols et al, 2015). We also explored the features of the type of localism that transfer embodies, and its reliance on financial and social capital within volunteer groups (Findlay-King et al, 2017). These most recent case studies indicate broad support for our earlier findings, and we will continue to explore – both theoretically and practically – the role of volunteers in delivering library services. Longer-term study is needed to establish whether these new models

of delivery dependent on unpaid volunteers are sustainable and offer advantages to previous archetypes.

Acknowledgement

We wish to thank all those participants who agreed to be interviewed for this research.

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