Investigating the public response to local government decisions to reduce or remove public library services

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Abstract

This paper presents new findings regarding the public response to public spending cuts as part of the UK Government fiscal consolidation programme, specifically to the perceived effects of reduced library opening hours on the public library user in a city in the North of England. An inductive approach was taken to the mixed methods study, using a self-completion, cross-sectional survey distributed to adults visiting one of three libraries in the city during a 6-day period. Qualitative and quantitative data analyses indicate a shared level of dissatisfaction with the service reductions across the respondents, and a shared perception of having been adversely affected. Statistical analyses revealed a strong level of agreement that the changes had a significantly negative impact on different aspects of respondents' lives. The research evidences the direct effects of service reductions on library users, as well as the wider social and economic implications.

Introduction: the current context

In 2010 the UK Coalition Government implemented a fiscal consolidation programme in keeping with the so-called 'global turn to austerity' (Krugman, 2015), with the intention of reducing an overall budgetary deficit. This strategy, ongoing under the present Conservative administration (2015-), has disproportionately affected local government in the UK, and in England in particular: between 2009-10 and 2014-15 spending by England's local authorities was cut by a fifth, more than twice the rate of spending cuts to the rest of the UK public sector (Gainsbury and Neville, 2015). The provision of public libraries has been a key area in which councils have sought to cut their spending, with a reported 16% reduction in public library expenditure in 2010-11 (Public Libraries News, 2013), the first year of the UK austerity programme. Inevitably, this diminished spending has resulted in service reductions and closures across the country, although the extent of the cuts is reportedly more severe in certain areas (for example in the north of England (Butler, 2015)) than in others (Flood, 2013). In January 2014 it was estimated (Farrington, 2014) that 453 UK public libraries were facing closure, had closed or had left council control since April 2013. In 2016, the BBC reported that of the 4,290 council-run public libraries in operation in the UK in 2010, in March 2016 this figure had fallen to 3,765, a reduction of 12.2% (BBC, 2016), and the proportion of council-run libraries is continuing to decrease (Axiell, 2017).

The UK public library service has experienced difficult times before, with significant service reductions and closures taking place in relatively recent history, in particular during the 1990s, when Proctor et al. (1998) identified 35 local authorities in England and Wales which had closed libraries for budgetary reasons between 1992 and 1997. By March 2016, however, that figure appears to have more than doubled (BBC, 2016). . Such widespread closure of UK public libraries is unprecedented.

Public libraries throughout the UK are statutory services (HMSO, 1964) and their availability to all is central to the ethics of their successful delivery (CILIP, 2017), yet usage levels are continuing to fall. The most prevalent explanation shared by local authorities, professional bodies, campaigners and the media tends to suggest that this is simply predominantly as a result of the reduced service provision caused by the government austerity cuts, but this popular understanding may be insufficient, as in fact usage has been decreasing since the 1970s (Grindlay & Morris, 2004). The trend appears to have gathered pace over the last decade: between 2004/05 and 2014/15 issues and visits in England fell by 34.4% and 22.1% respectively (CIPFA, 2015), and in 2015/16 further falls of 7.0% and 6.2% occurred (CIPFA, 2016). Meanwhile, the proportion of people using a library at least once in 12 months fell from 48.2% in 2005/6 to 34.5% in 2014/15 (DCMS, 2016).

The interpretation of such figures needs to take into account not only the much-reported service reductions but also two other broad considerations: changes in service delivery, and external social change. The way that library services have developed their operations means that lending has become less dominant amid diversifying library functions not so easily measured, and that remote usage facilitated by the internet often replaces a physical visit, and as things stand would fail to be counted in visitor statistics. For example, CIPFA data do not calculate all remote transactions, but include 'virtual visits' as visits to the library website. These figures show that while visits overall are declining the proportion of 'remote' visits is increasing, from 26.5% in 2010-11, to 29.0% in 2015-16 (CIPFA, 2016). Simultaneously, the decline of library using habits among large sections of society is very likely to be due to multiple social, economic and technological factors, including the wider social transition to a consumerist society and culture (Greene & McMenemy, 2012: 17). For instance, regular life-long users are giving way to episodic users who resort to the library in response to specific life events or when experiencing acute needs (MLA, 2010). Yet with service reductions gathering pace and the majority of the population now non-users, the question of how and whether today's non-users might engage or re-engage with libraries becomes more urgent: limited investment in maintaining and developing services and promoting the library 'offer' against a background of continuing cuts is presenting mixed messages to a weakly engaged public and it remains unclear how the continuance of the present state of affairs will impact on future usage levels.

What is clear, even though the causes of declining use are complex, is that closing libraries and reducing opening hours will not help to reverse this trend, so it is perhaps appropriate to regard the service cuts as the key issue. The entire public sector is currently facing difficult and challenging times, but the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) has argued that 'public libraries have fared worse than most other local government services', with 'cutbacks and radical change…taking place already in library and information services across the public sector' (CILIP, 2013: 3).

This paper will consider this local impact, by presenting the findings of a mixed methods investigation conducted in 2016 of the perceived effects of reduced library opening hours on the public library user in a city in the North of England, with a population of approximately 250,000. Public libraries in the city are well-used: in 2015, there were more than 1,006,000 visits to the 12 libraries across the city, the service had an average of 34,876 requests for information per month, it reported almost 14,000 new members joining that year, and 208,703 people booked in-house ICT sessions (data from unpublished city council report, 2016) . Yet the recent cuts in public spending have been particularly severe: the city councilwas required to achieve a budget reduction

of £48 million in the financial years 2014/15 and 2015/16, the public library service instructed to contribute £415,000 of this saving. As a result, the decision was made to withdraw from 2015 the mobile library service, to reduce the revenue stock fund, to reduce staffing levels, and to reduce the opening hours at all service points. Overall, there was a 18.5% reduction in opening hours across the city (84.5 hours in total).

The primary objective of this study was to examine the extent to which these service reductions have impacted on the city's public library users, with a specific focus on reduced library opening hours. The study also allowed for reflection on the extent to which this research supports the findings of previous research into public library service reductions and closures conducted by Proctor et al. in 1998, in the light of the overall decline in public library usage during the intervening period.

The perceived value of public library services to local communities

It is well evidenced that public libraries are valued by many people in society, and that they are 'at the heart of the intellectual and creative lives of the communities they serve' (Goulding, 2006), so it can reasonably be assumed that a reduction in provision will negatively affect local communities. Besemer and Bramley (2012) posited that libraries are a well-supported local public service; 'regarded as essential by over 80%' of the people in their study (p. 40). The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) also revealed public services to be well supported; the majority of the public participants in their 2010 research were 'positive about library services overall', 'valued them as public services' and 'tended to think that it was important that they remained free for all to use' (p. 3).

In terms of library use, research by Hawkins et al. (2001) found that 'small and large libraries tend to be preferred by different clientele and for different purposes', and that many people will use more than one library, 'satisfying their immediate, often leisure, needs locally and visiting a larger library to use a more extensive or specialised collection' (p. 262).

Quantitative and qualitative measurement of the value of public libraries

McMenemy (2007) argued that the public library is a service that 'constantly has to defend its right to exist' (p. 273), supporting the need to provide evidence to demonstrate its worth and value to all. Aabø (2005) studied the value of Norwegian public libraries using the contingent valuation method, in order to assess whether members of the public viewed the benefits of libraries as outweighing their cost. Motivated by 'the need to demonstrate

public libraries' economic importance in a time where economic pressure is increasing' (p. 488), Aabø concluded that public libraries in Norway are 'worth their price as viewed from the population's perspective' and that 'their benefits decidedly outweigh their costs' (p. 493). In a larger-scale Norwegian study of the use of public library spaces, Aabø et al. (2010) used quantitative methods to demonstrate the value of public libraries,the former finding a statistically significant correlation between a low income and a low education in use of the library as a meeting place, thereby indicating 'that the library as a meeting place plays a substantial role in equalizing the possibilities of being an active citizen across social and economic differences' (p.25). However, critics such as McMenemy (2007) have argued that quantitative data are not necessarily the best way to demonstrate value, potentially reducing 'a service that aims to provide a social and educational benefit into pounds, shillings and pence', and thereby emphasising economic value 'over the many others public libraries have' (p. 275). For example, when considering library book issue figures, McMenemy proposed that 'our concern should not only be that readers borrow the books, but that their experience of borrowing the books has a positive influence on them and society' (ibid.: 275).

In the past 20 years, numerous attempts have been made to measure community impact using qualitative methods. Linley and Usherwood (1998) argued that 'simply counting book issues' is not an adequate way of measuring the value of a public library; qualitative data is required to 'put flesh on the dry bones of statistical measures' (p. 85). Their social audit method was developed in order to measure the 'social and economic impact of public libraries' (ibid.: 6), making some use of quantitative data but primarily focusing on gathering a more qualitative picture of (for example) the ways in which public library users feel that reductions in service affect them. Halpin et al. (2015) led a more recent discussion involving a range of key stakeholders to discuss the current thinking on the value of public libraries, and concluded that more 'qualitative data and evidence of personal or social impact' is required to demonstrate the worth of public libraries (p. 35).

The public impact of spending cuts

Unsurprisingly, a review of the literature indicates that reductions made to public services have a negative impact on society. Lansdall-Welfare et al. (2012) analysed a large Twitter dataset and revealed a correlation between public mood and the severe cuts to public expenditure made by the UK government from 20th October 2010. From this date onwards the researchers noted an increase in public 'fear and anger' (ibid.: 1222) in the posts they viewed. Specifically regarding public library cuts, previous research suggests that the primary public concern relates to reduced opening hours. The MLA (2010), reporting findings of public focus groups, stated

that the need for longer and convenient opening hours was 'important for all demographic groups' (MLA, 2010: 7). Muir and Douglas (2001) argued that the 'shorter opening hours have, in effect, reduced access', with a resulting 'major impact on library users' (Muir and Douglas, 2001: 267). For Rooney-Browne (2009), public libraries are an 'essential public service' and play a 'vital role in helping individuals and communities survive the economic downturn' (Rooney-Browne, 2009: 348).

Two previous studies from the late 1990s have particularly informed this research, both conducted by teams from the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CPLIS) in the Information School (previously the Department of Information Studies) at the University of Sheffield. The first was conducted by Proctor, Usherwood and Sobczyk (1996), who investigated the effect of the temporary closure of public library services in Sheffield on the attitudes and behaviour of the city's library users. All but two of 34 service points were closed for an eight-week period in 1995 due to strike action taken by the staff of Sheffield Libraries and Information Services, which provided an opportunity to investigate public response, and to consider the extent to which previous usage patterns were resumed after the strike ended. The findings revealed that 'libraries play an important role in the lives of users' with nearly a third of all respondents (n=518) claiming that they 'could find no suitable alternative at all for the missing service' (ibid.: 37). The second study (Proctor, Lee and Reilly, 1998) examined the impact of public library closures and reductions in opening hours on library users, this time based on a wider survey of library authorities in England and Wales. The starting point for their work was that the 'general consensus in the literature is that accessibility is being jeopardised, but there is little evidence which describes the difficulties users experience when library hours have been reduced' (ibid.: 35). They surveyed a sample of library users and compared their library usage before and after reductions in opening hours to their primary public library. This revealed that '69% of the 75 respondents were visiting the library less or much less frequently since the hours had been reduced' (ibid., p. 47). However, despite the reduced opening hours, the majority of respondents did rearrange their library visits and continue to make use of the service, which the authors regarded as evidence that they 'value their local library and perceive it to be an irreplaceable resource' (ibid.: 57).

The research reported in this paper gives an updated public response to the more recent, arguably more severe cuts in public spending which have occurred since Proctor et al.'s 1996 and 1998 studies were conducted.

Methodology

An inductive approach was taken to the research, using a self-completion survey distributed to adults visiting one of three libraries in the city between Monday 27th July and Saturday 1st August 2015 inclusive. A 2014 customer segmentation library analysis report from the city's library service (unpublished document) informed the selection of the sites, based on the varying demographic profiles. Brief profiles of he three libraries in which respondents were surveyed are given below:

- **Library 1** is the city's central library. Residents of this area are described as predominantly either young, multi-ethnic, educated, professionals, who live in private rented flats; or as young, multi-ethnic families, who are unemployed or in 'elementary' occupations. At the time of data collection the largest number of the library's 71,912 registered users were aged between 25-34 (n=19,369, 26.93%), with the second largest group aged 35-44 (n=12,753, 17.73%). Unsurprisingly, this library has users registered from all across the city (users are registered to 4,519 different postcodes throughout the city (unpublished city council report, 2017)), so its catchment includes users from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Between 2014-15 and 2015-16 there was a 14% reduction in service hours at Library 1 (7 hours in total).

- **Library 2** is located in the west of the city where many residents are well-educated, young professionals living in private rented flats, or highly qualified professionals who own their property and have a high household income. At the time of data collection the largest number of the library's 6,568 registered users were aged below 18 years (n=1688, 25.7%), and the second and third largest age groups were 25-34 (n=1044, 15.9%) and 35-44 (n=953, 14.51%). Between 2014-15 and 2015-16 there was a 38.2% reduction in service hours at Library 1 (10.5 hours in total).

- **Library 3** is located in the north-east of the city, primarily an area of economic deprivation. The residents are likely to be unemployed, young families or lone parents in public rented houses, or older families, who are either unemployed or in 'elementary' occupations with a low income, living in public rented houses or who own their property. At the time of data collection the largest number of the library's 13,623 registered users were aged below 18 years (n=3,420, 25.1%), and the second and third largest age groups were also 25-34 (n=2,331, 17.11%) and 35-44 (n=1753, 12.87%), with a similar number of 18-24 year olds (n=1,703, 12.5%), Between 2014-15 and 2015-16 there was a 22.6% reduction in service hours at Library 1 (7 hours in total).

Although three sites were selected, the main focus for data collection was the central library (Library 1), given the limited authorised period in which to run the survey. Paper copies of the questionnaire were distributed by the researcher in Library 1, and by colleagues in the library service in Libraries 2 and 3. It was also felt that a good response rate from this library would be more likely to represent a cross-section of socio-economic, socio-cultural and geographical factors than data collection from a smaller, local branch library. There were, however, some limitations to the sampling for the study. The sample consisted of any adult who visited one of the three libraries during the week that the survey was conducted, and who was willing to participate in the research, so although it was cross-sectional, the sample did not necessarily represent the people of the city proportionally in terms of demographic characteristics. As the questionnaire did not employ any form of routing as all respondents were invited to answer all questions, those questions having limited applicability were answered by fewer people, with, it must be assumed, those for whom the question was irrelevant declining to answer. Had the survey been more extensive, it might have been possible to stratify the sample with reference to key population variables.

Despite these methodical limitations, surveys have several benefits as a research tool. They allow access to a large a number of respondents, in a short amount of time and with very little financial cost. A survey is a standardised document, asking the same questions of each respondent, under the same or very similar conditions, arguably generating more reliable data. Bryman (2004) suggests that whereas 'characteristics of interviewers may affect the answers that people give', in the survey the 'interviewer effects' are 'eliminated' (p.133). A further benefit of a self-completion survey is that the respondents are able to complete the survey in their own time, allowing them to think about the questions before they have to articulate their response.

De Vaus (1990) suggests that 'surveys just look at particular aspects of people's beliefs and actions without looking at the context in which they occur…taken out of context it is easy to misunderstand the meaning of behaviour' (pp.7-8). The survey was therefore designed to include both open and closed questions, in order firstly to measure quantitatively the demographic composition of the sample and to gauge their opinions on service reductions, and secondly to uncover the context and meaning of the responses (Seale, 2012).

Ethical approval for the research was granted prior to data collection via the University of Sheffield ethics review procedure (University of Sheffield, 2017). Informed consent was gained from all participants before completing the survey, using a verbal explanation and a participant information sheet. Each person was

informed that taking part in the research was entirely voluntary, and it was their right to refuse to take part in the research at any time and for any reason.

The survey contained 22 questions, plus a 'further comments' box and five demographic questions (see below). Questions 1-7 asked respondents (using mostly closed questions) which libraries they visited and how often, reasons for library use, and whether or not the reduced service hours (since April 2015, three months before completion) had affected their frequency of use. In questions 8-15 they were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of eight statements relating to reduced opening hours. Questions 16-22 asked how the service reductions had affected their library habits and how they spent their time and money, and what they would 'miss most about the library' if it closed altogether. Finally, five demographic questions were included regarding age (group), gender, employment status, disability and ethnicity.

Research findings

A total of 178 completed surveys were collected from adults during the six days specified above, the majority (n=146) from Library 1 (open on six days), with n=21 and n=11 from Libraries 2 and 3 respectively (open on five and four days respectively). These figures represent approximately 1.5% of the total visitor numbers for people of all ages (n=12,127) for the three libraries during that period. Given the low response rate from Libraries 2 and 3, the analysis which follows is based on the total number of surveys completed, and no attempt is made to compare findings across the three sites.

Of the 164 respondents who chose to state their gender, 48.9% (n=87) were male, and 43.3% (n=77) were female. Approximately one quarter (25.8%, n=46) of participants were aged 65-74, but there was a fairly even distribution of respondents across the other age groups. The sample contained 21.3% (n=38) of people who considered themselves to have a disability.

Just 7.3% (n=13) of the respondents identified as from a minority ethnic group, the majority (83.1%, n=148) describing themselves as 'White British'. Although ethnicity data are not collected as part of the library service registration process, the 2011 UK Census reported that 10.3% of residents were from a Black or Minority Ethnic group, so the proportion of BME respondents to this survey is smaller than would reasonably be expected.

The largest proportion of respondents (39.3%, n=70) described themselves as 'retired', 21.9% (n=39) as 'paid employed or self-employed', and 16.9% (n=30) as unemployed.

Response to changes in opening hours

Asked whether or not the reduction in opening hours 'has had an impact on your life', 78.1% (n=139) of respondents declared that it had, and just 12.4% (n=22) that it had not (the remaining respondents were unsure). A chi-square test showed that this was a highly significant level of agreement (chi-square = 160.66, df = 2, p < 0.001).

In response to the statement 'I am happy with the new library opening hours', 79.3% (n=141) of participants stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. 'I am happy with the new library opening hours'

A one-sample t-test showed that this disagreement was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale ('3= neither agree nor disagree') (t=15.77, p<0.001).

The perceived social, economic and cultural impact of reduced opening hours is discussed later in this paper, but first we can consider the ways in which such service cuts have specifically affected library use, in terms of convenience and access, frequency of use and even the overall quality of the library visit.

Perceived impact on library use

A term frequently used in the qualitative response to the reduced opening hours is 'convenience'. Respondents describe the difficulty of having to change the times that they visit the library, even that the service appears to be *'never open!'*

> *'I now have to visit more frequently to complete work. New times are not always convenient'. (Library 1)*

> *'Curtailed hours restrict convenience and sometimes use of the library'. (Library 2)*

> *'It is more difficult to visit in an evening and on Saturday due to the reduced hours...our visits to the library are less frequent'. (Library 2)*

> *'Very inconvenient, cannot visit the library as often. Having to get buses in to the town centre at an extra cost to myself.' (Library 2)*

In response to the statement 'The library is open at times that are convenient for me', the majority of respondents (69.1%, n=123) disagreed or strongly disagreed, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: 'The library is open at times that are convenient for me'
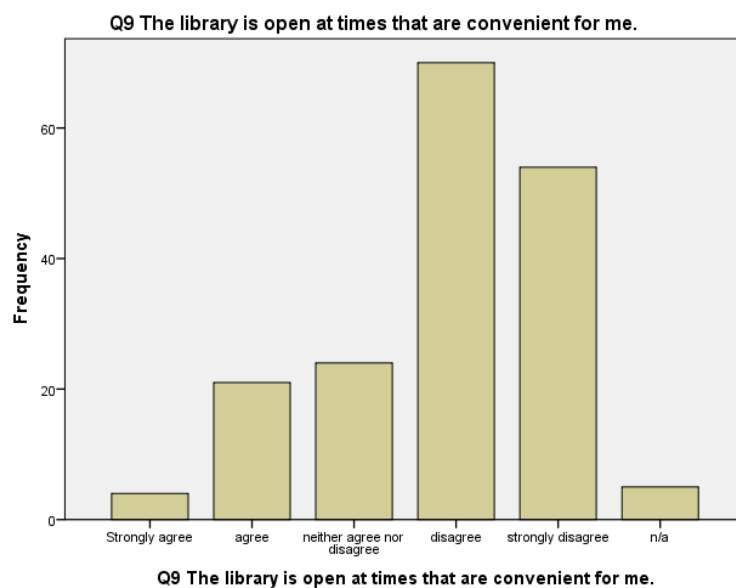
A one-sample t-test showed that this disagreement was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale (t=10.65, p<0.001). Interestingly, the perceived impact was stronger for male than female respondents; 77% (n=67) of male respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, in comparison to 59.8% (n=46) of female respondents. A further t-test showed that this was also a statistically significant difference (t=-2.18, p<0.05). Employed respondents were more likely than unemployed respondents to disagree or strongly disagree (76.9%, n=30 and 66.6%, n=20 respectively), which could relate to the increased difficulty of finding time to visit the library outside typical working hours.

A predictable consequence of reduced opening hours was noted by several respondents, who described the libraries they used as busier than before. Although higher visitor numbers is not usually a negative outcome for library staff and management, it could be less positive for users, particularly those with limited time:

'Now we have to wait to use computers.' (Library 1)

'Always busier when it's open, longer queues, busier staff. Often shut when I can come after work'. (Library 1)

'Computers are full more often, can't always access them when I want to.' (Library 2)

Many respondents described instances when they had arrived at a library without realising that it would be closed (as a result of changes to opening hours), and their frustration was clear:

'...wasted time visiting when library is closed.' (Library 1)

'I was told to come to the library for a bus pass. I had to come back at a different time when it's open. I find it very difficult to walk'. (Library 1)

'Came to get permit. Library wasn't open. Annoyed. Waste of my time'. (Library 1)

'Annoyance if come on wrong day'. (Library 1)

Proctor et al. (1998) similarly reported that their survey of 539 (public) respondents from the London borough of Ealing revealed that reduced opening hours had restricted spontaneous use of the service, caused problems with scheduling library visits, and reduced the value and convenience of a local service.

An examination of the literature regarding public library service reductions revealed certain recurring themes, which can usefully be grouped as: social, economic and cultural. Each of these will now be considered in turn, relating the new empirical findings to previous research.

Social impact and well-being

One of the primary and more striking themes emerging from the data related to respondents' perceptions of the impact of reduced opening hours on their social and mental well-being. Some respondents claimed that since the reduction in opening hours they are *'very sad'*, *'feel more depressed'*, *'have not known where to turn'* and *'no longer socialise like [they] did'*. Respondents reported issues such as *'more boredom'*, a *'loss of a place to go'*, describing an increased level of anxiety and fewer opportunities to socialise and communicate with other people.

In response to the statement 'the change in library opening hours has reduced my opportunities for socialising and talking to others', only 6.2% (n=11) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. A one-sample t-test showed that this was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale ('3= neither agree nor disagree') (t=-7.38, p<0.001). 42.1% (n=16) of the 38 respondents who considered themselves to have a disability, claimed that the reduction in library opening hours had 'reduced their opportunities for socialising and talking to others', compared to proportionally fewer 29.7% (n=37) of the 125 respondents who did not consider themselves to have a disability. However, a t-test showed that this result was not statistically significant (t=-.46, p>0.05).

Examples of comments made by respondents concerning the impact of service reductions on their social and mental well-being are given below:

> *'They have had a negative effect on my mental health. I love these libraries, especially the Avenues, which is my local one. Reducing hours has placed a restriction on me and my quality of life'. (Library 2)*

> *'...less opportunity for me to bring my children in to read books and engage with other children.' (Library 1)*

> *'Impact on both my life and my child's. Less opportunity to meet other parents and children. Less opportunity for my child to be introduced to books, reading, learning, socialising and communication.' (Library 1)*

The most frequent response to the question 'What do you do in the time that you would have previously spent in the library?' was a version of *'stay at home'*. Examples include: *'stay home'*, *'sat at home moaning because I have nothing to read'*, *'wait for the library to be open'*, 'attempt to study at home with no internet access' and *'spend time watching TV at home'*. Some respondents claimed that they were doing *'nothing'*, for example suggesting that there is *'not much to do when on benefits aged 60'*. An increase in the number of people either staying at home or finding themselves with 'nothing' to do could arguably increase isolation and the associated risks of isolation, such as a decline in health (Age UK, 2014; Putnam,2000) .

Asked 'what would you miss most about the library if it closed?', again some very strong views were expressed. The library was described variously as a 'social centre' and 'community resource', and respondents stated that they would miss *'socialising'*, seeing and talking to people and attending social groups such as book groups or baby and toddler groups, even the *'feeling of being safe'*:

> *'Baby and toddler groups, children's library. I would be really sad to lose the library. (Library 2)*

> *'Having time to be with friends and a nice calm place to go.' (Library 1)*

> *'I would miss almost every area of the library, IT, Wi-Fi, books, staff, friends, feeling of being safe, having somewhere to go.' (Library 2)*

> *'... safe, friendly place to meet.' (Library 1)*

> *'I think I would get very depressed if isolated because I could not research and work in libraries.' (Library 1)*

These are similar findings to those of Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998), who suggest that public libraries encourage and enable 'a sense of belonging and community' (p.102). Linley and Usherwood (1998) also report that 'the provision of public library services helps promote social cohesion and community confidence' (p. 84).

Macdonald (2012) argues that public libraries provide a space allowing people to 'communicate with others' and also provide access to information, supporting people to lead 'independent and fulfilling lives' (p. 56).

Research conducted during the period of severe service reductions in the 1990s emphasised a similarly critical role of the public library service in supporting mental health. Proctor and Simmons (2000), for example, offer that public libraries' contribution is in combating 'loneliness, boredom and depression' (p.33). Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) also confirm this supportive role, describing how elderly people often rely on the service 'to keep their minds active' and many public library users find that visiting the service helps 'them to overcome loneliness and avoid depression' (p.100). Linley and Usherwood (1998) concur that there is much evidence to demonstrate that public libraries have a positive effect on people in terms of 'psychological health and well-being, especially for isolated and vulnerable elderly and disabled people' (p. 48). More recently, Arts Council England (2014) argued that 'library-based health provision could contribute to reducing the current high costs of ill health' (p.4).

Economic and educational impact

The 2010 MLA report revealed that economic and educational factors are central to service provision, particularly given that public libraries are still free of charge, which remains 'a big incentive to many users', and above all to 'users from lower income groups' (p. 5). Certainly, this study clearly showed that the most valued aspects of a public library service were the free access to books (see also 'Cultural impact', below), computers and the internet:

> *'Wonderful range of new books I couldn't afford to buy.' (Library 3)*

> *'Spending time with children and encouraging to read for free. Book shops get very expensive.' (Library 3)*

> *'Borrowing books. I enjoy reading a wide range of books and could not afford to buy them.' (Library 3)*

> *'Free access to the computers.' (Library 1)*

> *'I would have no access to the internet at all.' (Library 1)*

Linley and Usherwood (1998) state that for adult learners and people seeking employment, public libraries are 'an important source of information on careers and training opportunities' and have the potential to increase the 'life chances of individuals, in terms of education and job opportunities' (p. 84). They suggest that 'the library might be more important in an area where there are fewer educational resources' (ibid.: 28), warning that the educational and economic opportunities of the public library service can be restricted by a lack of computers and limited opening hours. With reference to the present study, the rate of unemployment in the city is higher than the UK national average, reported by the Office for National Statistics in May 2015 as being the third highest of all local authorities in Great Britain (ONS, 2015). It is therefore interesting to note that 65% (n=34) of those responding to the statement 'The change in library opening hours has made it more difficult for me to look for a job' were either in agreement or strong agreement, with just 17% (n=9) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. A one-sample t-test showed that this was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale (t=-5.18, p<0.001). This was supported by the qualitative comments regarding the impact of reduced opening hours, many of which specifically related to ICT facilities:

'...will get reprimanded at JC [the Job Centre] because I can't look for jobs as much.' (Library 1)

'No longer open on a Wednesday, jobs go public on Wednesday. Unable to be first to apply, don't have internet at home'. (Library 2)

'I have to do daily job search, have to rely on service, no other places to go'. (Library 1)

'I don't have internet access in my flat, so therefore, when I do visit the library, I have far less time to do what I need to do.' (Library 1)

Respondents were also presented with the statement 'The change in library opening hours has limited my opportunities to receive support from library staff to use computers, look for a job or carry out research', and again there was a far higher level of agreement than disagreement: 35.4% (n=63) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, compared to just 3.9% (n=7) who disagreed or strongly disagreed. Again, a one-sample t-test showed that this was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale (t=-10.83, p<0.001), which is a meaningful level of agreement with the statement. Further analysis by employment group revealed that unemployed respondents were significantly more likely than retired respondents to agree with the statement (t=2.092, p<0.05), as one would expect.

Romero (2011) suggests that public libraries should focus their resources and attention on supporting people who want to access 'learning opportunities, […] computer literacy, communication, interviewing or CV presentation techniques, and the use of information sources, job searching skills' (p. 239). Given that the majority of employment opportunities are now posted online, for many people the only way to access the internet is at their local library. According to the MLA (2010), 20% of public library users 'go to use computers with internet connections' (p. 4).

In response to the statement 'the change in library opening hours has made it more difficult for me to access the internet', just 3.4% (n=6) of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, whereas 43.2% (n=77) strongly agreed or agreed. This second figure is high, although it should also be noted that a slightly higher proportion of respondents (45.5%, n=81) stated that internet use was not relevant to them, presumably because they visited a public library for other services. Nonetheless, with 43.2% of respondents reporting that the reduced opening hours have had a significant impact on their ability to access the internet, this is still a key factor. A one-sample t-test showed that this was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale (t=-12.37, p<0.001).

A further economic impact of the reduction in library opening hours is that many people have had to spend more money as a consequence of these reductions in provision. 33.7% (n=60) of respondents felt that they had 'spent more money on events and resources (such as books, DVDs, computers, activities, etc.) since the library opening hours have been reduced'. Questionnaires were also annotated by a number of respondents to the effect that they had not spent more money, but that this was because they did not have the means to do so, for example 'can't afford to', 'no spare money'.

The 'further comments' section of the questionnaire elicited several strongly worded comments regarding the impact of reduced opening hours on educational attainment, illustrative examples of which are given below:

> *'Let's not be shy, education standards in [city]are abysmal. Reducing library access means that the poorest people in our city are having their opportunities to better themselves reduced. Opportunities to study should never be dictated by money.' (Library 1)*

'Libraries are an essential service to citizens, especially those in need of additional learning and the need to improve their literacy and generally to expand their knowledge. Savings on intellectual services are not savings at all.' (Library 1)

Cultural impact

One of the ways in which public library users are found to benefit from the service is via free access to cultural and leisure resources, services and activities. Hayes and Morris (2005) examined the impact of leisure activities and resources offered by public libraries, concluding that 'the leisure role of libraries is essential in many people's lives', and that 'the benefits go far beyond simply enjoyment and amusement, to being an essential form of relaxation for some people, helping to relieve stress […] and assisting others with the treatment of an illness' (p.138).

Many public library services engage with arts and culture through in-house events and activities (Pujadas Bartes, 2014;Smallwood, 2014), a role which Robertson (2005) argues is closely linked to its role in supporting lifelong learning. Respondents to the present study were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement 'The change in library opening hours has reduced the number of occasions that I can take part in free activities and events', and unsurprisingly a high proportion of respondents (33.1%, n=59) either agreed or strongly agreed, compared to just 5.0% (n=9) who disagreed or strongly disagreed. Again, a one-sample t-test showed that this was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale (t=-7.93, p<0.001), which is a meaningful level of agreement with the statement.

The MLA (2010) reported that the most common reason 'for visiting a library [is] to use or borrow a book for pleasure (76%)' (MLA, 2010: 4). The focus groups carried out by Linley and Usherwood (1998) confirm 'the enduring popularity of leisure reading' and the importance of public libraries 'as a source of free reading material' (p.28). These benefits are arguably particularly important for those with a lower income, for example the unemployed. Unsurprisingly, in the present study resources such as books, periodicals, newspapers, magazines, CDs and DVDs were frequently given as examples by those answering the open question 'What would you miss most about the library if it closed?', with reading and borrowing books listed by far the most frequently:

*'Books that I can't source elsewhere.' (Library 1)*

'Where would I be without books? I grew up in a rough area with a high criminal element. It was only my local library and books that kept me from falling in to bad company.' (Library 1)

'Access to all the books to read as it helps my dyslexia.' (Library 1)

'I'm disabled and reading books is a big part of my life.' (Library 1)

Interestingly, in response to the statement 'The change in library opening hours has reduced the amount of books that I read', a larger proportion of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (36.5%, n=65) than disagreed or strongly disagreed (20.8%, n=37), as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. 'The change in library opening hours has reduced the amount of books that I read'
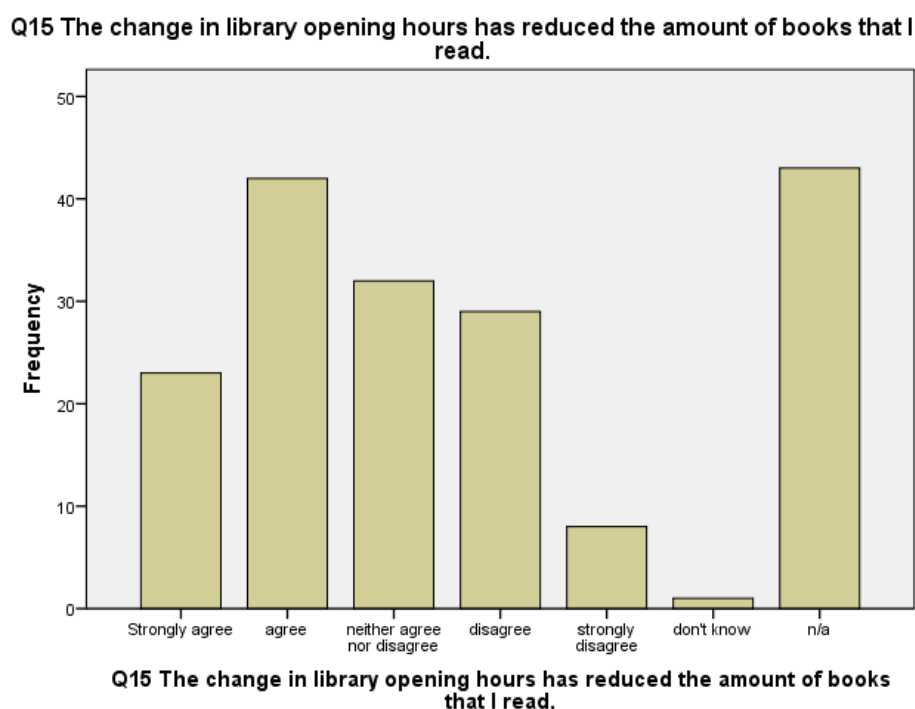
Q15 The change in library opening hours has reduced the amount of books that I read.

A one-sample t-test showed that this was a statistically significant difference from the midpoint of the scale (t= -3.18, p<0.01), which is a meaningful level of agreement with the statement.

The findings of Linley and Usherwood's (1998) social impact audit revealed that many participants viewed the public library as 'a centre of cultural life', 'a vehicle for cultural regeneration' (p. 37). It is therefore interesting that this new research revealed that a city's residents were particularly concerned by the reductions in opening hours shortly before the city was due to begin its year as UK City of Culture:

'It is a poor reflection on [city] to reduce the opening hours when it is about to become the city of culture.' (Library 1)

'[Name] City of Culture. Well done [Name]City Council. What an embarrassment reducing the hours. Come on Council, sort it out.' (Library 1)

'It is unlikely to provide a positive image as [Name] approaches being a city of culture.' (Library 1)

'I believe the reduction in opening hours is unnecessary and makes a mockery of our so called 'city of culture' status.' (Library 1)

General public perceptions of library service reductions and closures

As previously stated, the study was conducted in the city following its removal of the mobile library service and reductions in stock funds, staffing levels and opening hours. The 'further comments…about the reduction in public library opening hours in [City]' section of the questionnaire revealed a strong desire for the opening hours to be restored to their previous timetable:

'I believe a main library is a focal point for a city such as [Name] which is of importance to visitors and locals alike. [City] Central Library therefore should maintain a full service and revert to the opening hours prior to April 2015.' (Library 1)

'Better for the library to close on one full day rather than two half days.' (Library 1)   *'I really do think that a city the size of [Name]should have a central library that is open all day on week days and Saturdays.' (Library 1)*

'I hope the reduction in opening hours will soon be reversed.' (Library 1)

At the time at which the survey was distributed, no service points had been closed, although it is unsurprising that many respondents were fearful that closures might occur, given not only the local context but also the national local authority cuts as part of the UK austerity programme (Gainsbury and Neville, 2015). When they were asked the hypothetical question 'What would you miss most about the library if it were to close?', a

number of respondents were incredulous, and made it clear that they could not, or did not want to contemplate the possibility of a library closure:

'If it closed for good? You are joking aren't you?' (Library 1)

'If the library services in this city were to atrophy any more, I should seriously consider moving elsewhere.' (Library 1)

'Libraries are funded by tax payer and therefore you've no right to close any of them. They're an essential human right.' (Library 1)

Given the apparent fear of service closure, respondents expressed gratitude and appreciation for the service, and pleaded for the opening hours not to be reduced further:

'Thanks for keeping the service going.' (Library 1)

'Please do not reduce the library hours anymore.' (Library 1)

'Please do not close the central library.' (Library 1)

'No complaints. Excellent service. Please don't close.' (Library 1)

The majority of additional comments expressed strongly negative opinions and emotions regarding the reduced public library provision in the city, although there was a degree of acceptance from a smaller number of respondents, and an acknowledgement that this is a wider political phenomenon related to government austerity measures:

'Would have preferred them to be left as they are but I understand that it is out of the library's hands.' (Library 2)

'I agree with you, if it is improving work and easier for you to serve the public.' (Library 3)

'I think this is forced on [Name] City Council by the reduction in Central government finances, not something they would have otherwise done.' (Library 1)

More typically, the comments were far more negative in tone, with an angry or frustrated response to reduced hours and phrases such as *'excludes people', 'not good enough', 'ridiculous', 'culturally unacceptable', 'disgraceful', 'absolutely crap',* and *'an embarrassment'*. Much of the anger seems to be directed at senior management within the City Council, particularly with reference to their financial decisions, and more broadly at politicians, both local and national:

> *'Libraries in [City] are the best service that this council offers. Why are you reducing your best service?' (Library 1)*

> *'Stop penny pinching. Pay the [Name]City Council managers less and save that way.' (Library 1)*

> *'Whoever made the decision for the current opening hours should be sacked for sheer incompetence.' (Library 1)*

> *'If they need more money for libraries, then pay politicians less. We need them less than libraries anyway.' (Library 1)*

> *'As a Labour-run council, I'm really shocked by the council's attitude. How about making cuts elsewhere?' (Library 1)*

For the above respondents, the service reductions seem to have been unfairly allocated. It is worth noting that typically local government achieves cuts through two mechanisms: prioritising/de-prioritising certain services as a matter of policy, and 'salami slicing' each departmental budget in order to distribute the cuts more equally. Both approaches are common, the first initially to set the priorities and the second thereafter to maintain the relative prioritisation.

The views expressed above also echo the findings of Pateman and Vincent (2010) and Usherwood (1993), who reported that many elected members 'did not appreciate fully the importance of the library service' (p.118), giving the example of the Conservative Chairperson of a county council, who suggested 'The library service is underrated in local government' (p.119). Despite a perceived lack of interest or involvement of elected members in the management of a public library service, Simmons and Proctor (1998) emphasised that this level of interest might increase significantly if a branch closure were being considered:

'The closure of local services in marginal seats obviously might have a critical impact on an individual's electoral chances, and local people also have a right to expect their councillors to fight for services in their wards' (p.12).

In relation to the previously described fear that service closures might follow reductions in opening hours, respondents also described their fear of a growing trend, and of a broader societal issue:

'I think that this is the thin end of the wedge and if we are not careful more and more libraries will be closed.' (Library 1)

'A downward spiral I fear, if less and less people use the library due to inconvenient opening hours, no doubt the city council will decide [to] close the library completely because not enough people are using the branch.' (Library 2)

'This is short-sighted and will cost more money in the long run- reduction in literacy and education, lack of information. People services make for a better society and better people. Some people have no value of anything other than money.' (Library 1)

'... for me it represents a sign of the shrinking of a civilised society.' (Library 1)

Discussion and research contribution

The research presented here has evidenced the direct effects of service reductions on current library users, as well as the wider social and economic implications. At one level, the findings are to be expected; repeating those of earlier studies in highlighting the many different types of value public libraries bring to individuals and communities, whilst warning of the social harm caused by service reduction or removal. However, in terms of the current political and socio-economic context, they also speak of something new. Although Proctor et al. (1996, 1998) studied the effects of a temporary loss of service occasioned by a strike in Sheffield, as well as more permanent reductions nationally, this new evidence has focused on responses to permanent loss of service in one English city, several years into an unprecedented austerity regime which has seen public service cuts across the country on a scale previously unimagined.

Statistical analyses revealed significant findings for each of the eight statements respondents were presented with in the questionnaire survey. These indicate a strong overall trend of dissatisfaction with the reduced opening hours, and a strong level of agreement that the changes have had a significantly negative impact on different aspects of their lives. Interestingly, in almost all cases statistical tests revealed no significant difference in the level of agreement across different demographic groups:

- For analysis by gender the only significant difference was that male respondents were statistically more likely to disagree that the revised opening hours were convenient to them.

- For analysis by employment group there were no significant differences between employed and unemployed respondents. The only significant finding regarding employment status was that unemployed respondents were statistically more likely than retired respondents to agree that the change in library opening hours had limited their opportunities to receive library staff support to use computers, look for a job or conduct research. Otherwise there were no significant differences between employed and unemployed respondents.

- For analysis by disability there were no statistically significant differences between respondents who stated that they had a disability, and those who did not.

- No further statistical tests were conducted to compare responses by ethnic group, as there was an insufficient number of respondents from a minority ethnic group (n=13, 7.3%) to enable meaningful analysis.

Emerging from these new data is an interesting overall trend: that there is a shared level of dissatisfaction with the service reductions across the respondents, and a shared perception of having been adversely affected. Based on the evidence of this study it should not be assumed that one particular demographic characteristic will necessarily lead to a more negative response to public library service reductions.

The findings also concur with Proctor, Lee and Reilly's (1998) suggestion that the 'contribution of the local library to community life and individual well-being is far reaching, distinctive and irreplaceable' (p.102), and more recently by Macdonald, 2012 and Arts Council England, 2014). The reduction of opening hours appears to have had a harmful impact on the mental well-being of many library users in the city, arguably demonstrating the social and emotional benefits of a public library service.

In a recent discussion of the UK public response to the Government austerity programme, Stanley (2014) argues, 'Opinion polls have consistently shown that while voters are wary over the speed, depth and harmfulness of the cuts, there is still a 'vast majority' who accept the necessity and inevitability of significant cuts in public expenditure' (p.902). As previously stated the respondents in the present study showed a certain degree of acceptance of the reduced opening hours and the resulting impact on the service as a whole. However, the findings have also revealed a more questioning, angry public attitude to the decisions made by library managers, the local council and even the national government with regards to the larger programme of public service reductions of which reduced opening hours form only a part. Grass roots dissatisfaction with and alienation from the political 'establishment', largely as a result of austerity, has now had several years to take hold, influenced by significant coverage in the press, whilst the growing use of social media has provided a channel through which a re-politicised public can vent and amplify its frustration (Braw, 2014). The new research supports the findings of Lansdall-Welfare, Lampos and Cristianini (2012), who similarly propose that there is a correlation between public mood and cuts to public spending; cuts tend to result in a negative public mood with emotions such as 'fear and anger' (p.1222).

Conclusion and recommendations for further research

If, as the current research shows, public libraries are instrumentally valuable in social and economic terms, and the curtailment of services reduces life chances for users (and by implication denies them to would-be users), then further, broader-based work is vital.

Rather like the realisation that quantitative measures of public library processes, such as issues and visits, are never sufficient on their own in order to describe value and impact of the service, so too must it be accepted that user surveys – even qualitative ones – only tell part of the story. As with much of the earlier research, these findings were obtained through the lens of service users alone. User surveys provide a good general understanding of how service reductions – actual or anticipated – might affect those who are accustomed to using a library and who presumably derive some value from so doing, but they do not always capture the views of occasional users so well, nor obviously do they obtain any feedback from non-users in the wider community. An important feature of sample selection in many user surveys, even when stratified, is the tendency to over-sample the most frequent users, whilst occasional users are under-represented. Statistically, this is to be expected, as occasional users are not seen very often, and in many senses results based mainly on regular users are acceptable, as in business terms they are surely the most valuable market segment which needs to be retained

(Sarvari et al, 2016). Arguably though, this reasoning misses the important point that evidence from occasional, as well as lapsed or total non-users should also inform the debate on the benefits, relevance and importance of library provision, which together with broader social and political research, can help answer many other pertinent questions about the two-way relationship between present day society and its libraries.

It is important that policy makers, service providers, researchers and other stakeholders understand this relationship with communities as bi-directional (Clarence and Gabriel, 2014) since the future of public libraries now depends on a correct analysis of the links between libraries and communities if libraries are to be re-established as relevant institution for present-day society. It has for long been accepted that libraries must engage with their users and potential users, although the view that public libraries have a business relationship with customers and that the retention and growth of the customer base is to be tackled as a business management problem is comparatively recent and still controversial. What is less well understood is that from a sociological perspective, citizens both individually and collectively have differing levels of engagement with public institutions, including libraries. This engagement waxes and wanes for all manner of largely external reasons, hence the episodic nature of library use referred to in the 2010 MLA research. Meanwhile, the literature on social capital and the thesis that has been constructed around long-term decline in civic engagement (Putnam, 2000) report that maintaining strong cohesive communities is essential for a healthy society, but worryingly, this is being threatened because multiple facets of modern life are militating towards a general withdrawal of 'buy-in' to public institutions.

The long-term decline in English public library usage and the current acceleration of that decline noted at the beginning of this paper needs therefore to be explained both in terms of the austerity regime and of properly understood external social factors.

Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) concluded their research by pointing to the need for policy makers 'to take steps to protect the local library if citizens are not to be disenfranchised from the information society' (p.97), and both a fear of disenfranchisement and a sense of anger directed towards the political classes was certainly evident in the new findings presented in this paper. Almost two decades later, a debate in the House of Lords in October 2016 saw Lord Bird, a cross-bench Peer of the House of Lords, describing the ongoing cuts to public library services and making a recommendation 'that Her Majesty's Government supply some emergency relief money to stop local authorities doing this dastardly deed, this process of philistinising our communities.'

As Councils face still more funding cuts and reductions in library services and staff numbers mean that much existing knowledge is at risk of being cut, the present authors feel that further research is now required to consider the *politics* of service reductions and closures, to uncover not only what has materially changed in terms of service provision, but also how the thinking of politicians, council officers and the public has altered in relation to libraries. Drawing from the understanding of public opinion which this paper has informed, further research could be undertaken to provide library managers and elected members with the data necessary to inform decisions about service options in the context of declining or standstill budgets, decisions which if appropriately made should provide all members of the local community with the best possible service.

Acknowledgements

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