

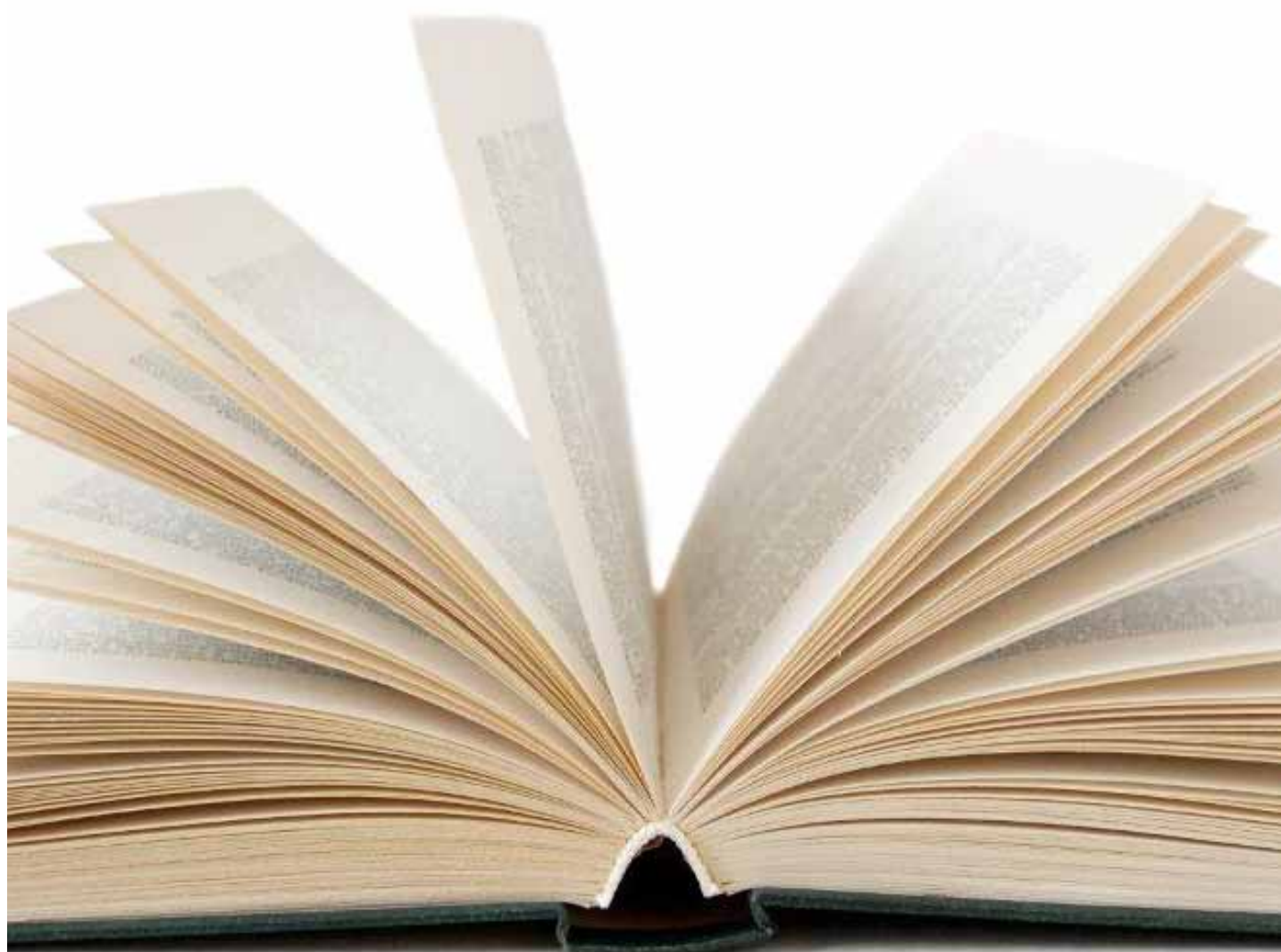
**NFWI Research**

January 2013

the**WI**  
INSPIRING WOMEN

# ON PERMANENT LOAN?

## COMMUNITY MANAGED LIBRARIES: THE VOLUNTEER PERSPECTIVE



## **About the NFWI**

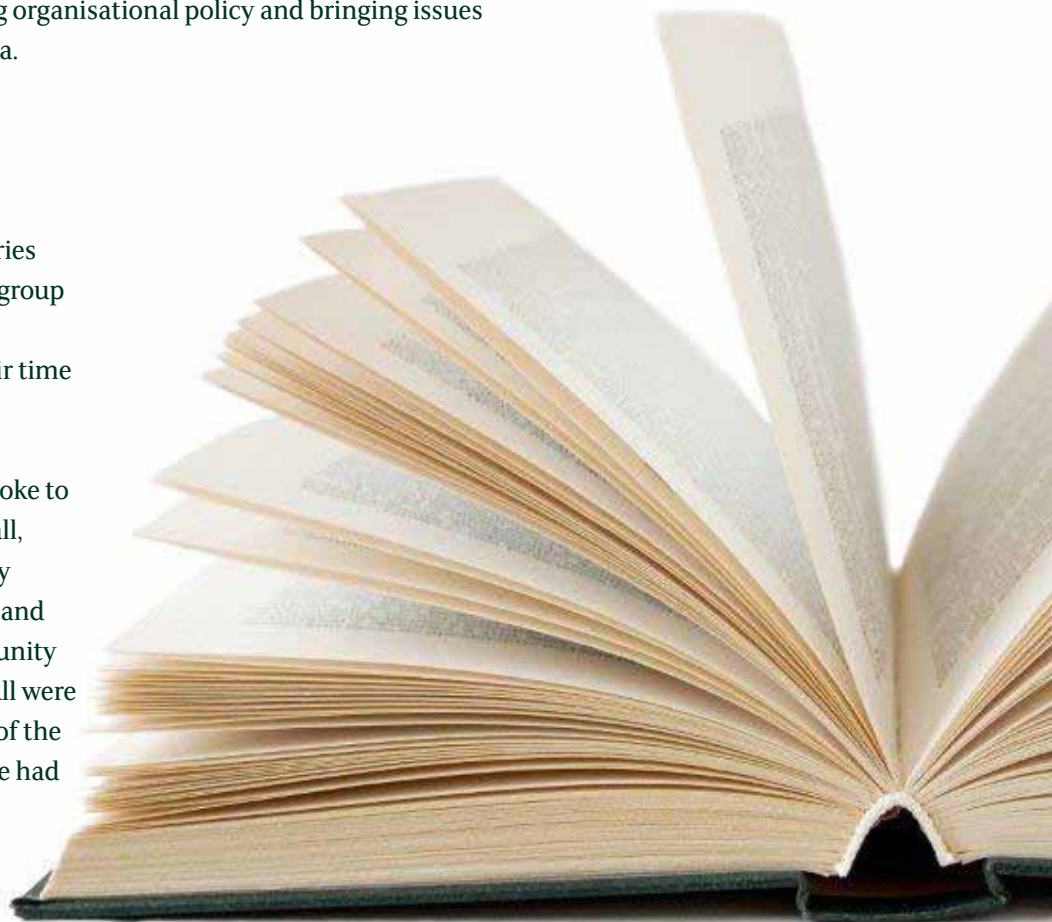
The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) is an educational, social, non-party political and non-sectarian organisation. It was established to ensure that women are able to take an effective part in their community, to learn together, widen their horizons, improve and develop the quality of their lives and those of their communities and together influence local, national and international affairs on issues that matter to members.

The NFWI is the largest women's organisation in the UK with some 212,000 members in 6,500 Women's Institutes across England, Wales and the Islands. The NFWI has a long history of undertaking educational work and campaigning on a diverse range of issues. The first NFWI mandate was passed in 1918, and since then the organisation has accumulated a wide-ranging portfolio of policy concerns on a local, national and international level. The NFWI resolution process means that members play a central role in defining organisational policy and bringing issues onto the organisation's national agenda.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Ian Anstice, Public Libraries News for his role facilitating the focus group and to the WI members and library volunteers who generously shared their time and experiences with us.

The dedication of the volunteers we spoke to was truly inspiring. Most, though not all, were retired professionals, and in many cases their ongoing efforts to preserve and deliver a library service in their community constituted a full time commitment. All were motivated by a shared understanding of the value that maintaining a library service had for the local community.



# Foreword

*“This meeting urges HM Government to maintain support for local libraries as an essential local educational and information resource”*

*Nedderton WI,  
Northumberland  
Federation*

*2011 NFWI AGM  
Resolution*

At the 2011 NFWI AGM, WI members passed a resolution raising awareness of the growing crisis the library service was facing and calling for more support for local library services. The WI ‘Love your Libraries’ campaign that followed was built on the understanding that our public libraries are cherished spaces which hold a unique position in local communities. In true WI spirit, members mobilised to demonstrate the importance of the public library network and the continued demand for this key service.

In the 18 month period since the WI campaign was launched, the scale of closures -to date at least - has not been as severe as initially predicted by some; yet what we have seen is ever-increasing fragmentation in the way that the library service operates. Library services have faced increasing scrutiny. In many cases this has driven innovation and service improvements, but at the same time it is clear that some services have found they are bearing the brunt of service reductions with library opening hours cut back, book stocks diminishing and a reduction in the range of services offered. Unless there is a willing corps of campaigners, volunteers or fundraisers to fight for their library service, they may even find that the future of the library itself hangs in the balance and often communities find that the only way to retain the service is to step in and take over the management of the library.

While it is clear that there are many community managed libraries doing excellent work across the country, community managed libraries should not be used as a substitute for the publicly run network. Four or five years ago, these libraries were considered the exception rather than the norm. Figures suggest that this is a trend that is changing at speed and community managed libraries are becoming more common. Furthermore, there are early indications that the community run library model is increasingly being considered by policy makers as an appropriate vehicle for delivering library services.

In 1964, an Act of Parliament was passed to ensure that every citizen was granted access to a comprehensive and efficient library service; a service that would play an important role in facilitating access to books and resources, promoting shared knowledge and equality of opportunity, facilitating community cohesion and enabling life-long learning and literacy from cradle to grave. The difficult economic environment has presented significant challenges for this network, yet it also means that the role the service plays in building skills and knowledge is more important than ever.

Almost 50 years on from the Act, the NFWI fears that the increasing divergence in the way the library service is being administered could result in a two-tiered library system in the long-term. We are calling on parliamentarians of all political colours to preserve the integrity of the Act and ensure that everyone in the UK, no matter where they live, is granted access to a library service that is fit for purpose.

*Ruth Bond*

**NFWI Chair**

## Summary

Libraries run by volunteers and the community are not new; however, indications suggest that they are on the increase.

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 places a statutory duty on library authorities to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service. Community managed libraries have to date raised relatively little debate in terms of the 1964 Act, yet as the number of community managed libraries increases and local authorities struggle to balance their statutory duties with their budgetary ones, it is clear that local authorities are looking for new ways to discharge their statutory obligations and use the discretion that they have available to deliver services innovatively.

Although this report focuses primarily on the experiences of volunteers, this apparent shift in emphasis is significant in that it reinforces what we are already starting to see in practice – that the community managed model is one that policymakers at national and local level are keen to adopt in greater numbers.

Perhaps as expected, those we spoke to

*Without adequate guidance and mechanisms in place, this situation is only likely to become more acute*

at each community managed library had significantly different experiences in the assistance and support they had been afforded in setting up and running their library. This included the relationship with the local authority, the way the library was administered and run and the expectations placed on the volunteers. The majority of the community managed libraries involved in the focus group had some form of agreement with the local authority in place, conferring certain duties, responsibilities and obligations on the community group running the library. These included opening hours, staffing, and monitoring and review of the service. The corresponding obligations required of the local authority were more limited.

What also became obvious from our research was the sheer amount of work that was required on the part of volunteers to ensure the continued existence of many of these libraries. This was exacerbated by the limited guidance available to volunteers, the

specific skill set required to run a library, and confusion around legal obligations and training. This was frustrated further by a dependency on several competing factors, many of which were beyond the control of volunteers. As one of the participants in our focus group explained:

*“The current situation we’ve got of ‘maybe we’ll work with you, maybe we’ll give you access to the library management system and maybe we’ll give you some money, maybe we’ll give you some old stock to be getting on with’... That gives you a confused situation...”*

This disparate approach means that a piecemeal jigsaw of library services is already developing, with varying levels of service provision existing within, and between, localities. Without adequate guidance and mechanisms in place, this situation is only likely to become more acute as more communities find themselves at the front line of library services. Furthermore as community managed libraries become more

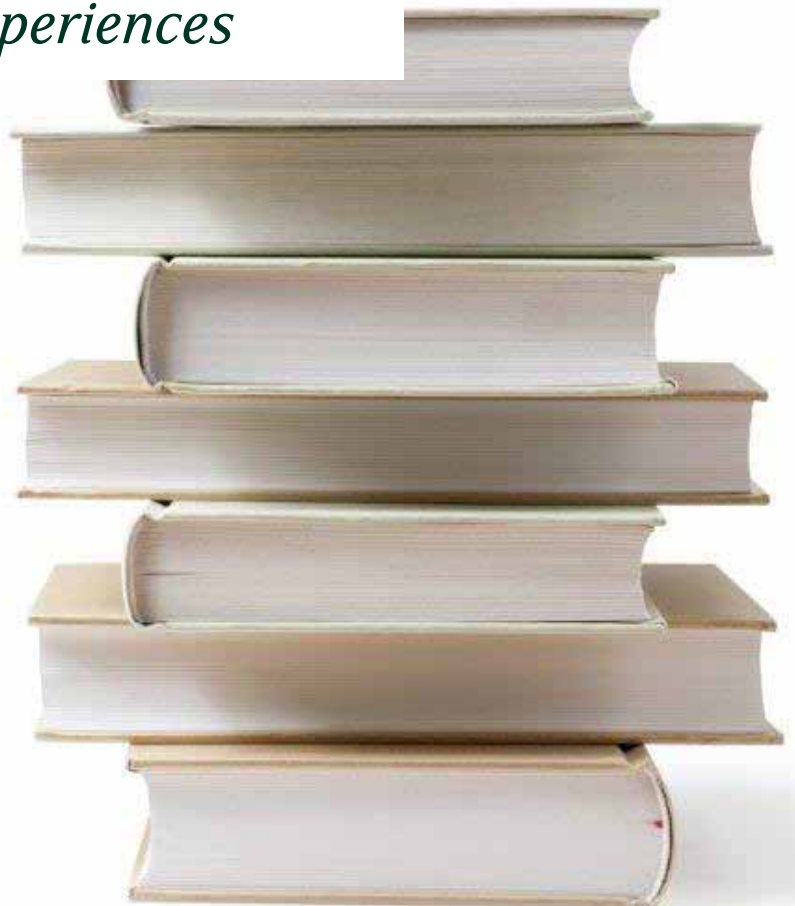
common, it is clear that this piecemeal approach is not fit for purpose.

Public libraries are a huge asset to any community, and the fact that numerous communities have gone to great lengths to prevent library services from closing down demonstrates this. However, only certain communities have the resources to effectively set up and run a library and we are concerned that the proliferation of these models could effectively lead to a 'postcode lottery' of library services with the creation of a two-tiered system of library provision that undermines the benefits of skilled and trained library staff and under-estimates the role that they play in both delivering an effective public service and supporting communities.

The experiences of existing community managed libraries demonstrate that there are important lessons to be learnt, as well as difficult questions to be asked. Policymakers at both national and local level should take the opportunity to learn from these experiences, so that the library service can continue to be a thriving community resource.

This report will first of all consider the policy and statutory context within which community managed libraries operate, before using the findings from the focus group to look in more detail at some of the issues that the proliferation of this network raises from both a service provision, and a volunteer, perspective.

*Policymakers at both national and local level should take the opportunity to learn from these experiences*



# Introduction

The development of community managed libraries is a trend that has emerged in recent years as a response to significant financial pressures at local authority level. Despite considerable debate about library closures, and the apparent increased prevalence of community managed libraries, to date there has been limited effort to assess the development of alternative models of provision.

Since the WI's library campaign launched in 2011, the NFWI has been contacted by many WI members who have been involved in setting up and running community libraries in various capacities. Every member had a different story to tell and further research indicated that there was an increasing number of libraries being established and run in this way, with similarly disparate experiences in terms of their set-up and operations, and the challenges that they faced.

Furthermore, there appeared to be little consistent guidance or support available for volunteers who were involved in, or were thinking of becoming involved in, community managed libraries.

While the NFWI is a national body, it is firmly rooted at local community level through the wider WI movement of 212,000 WI members and 6,500 WIs across England and Wales. Many members play active roles in their local communities and with over 80% of WI members engaged in some form of volunteering, it is clear that the experiences of some of these volunteers can help provide valuable insight into community managed libraries and build understanding of the opportunities presented when communities become more involved in their libraries, the challenges that these services face, and some of the factors impacting on their overall viability.

*These volunteers can help provide valuable insight into community managed libraries*

The NFWI welcomed the Minister's commitment during the recent Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry to report on the cumulative effect of library service cuts in local authority provision and the promotion of alternative models of governance and service provision in the library service. We hope that this short report will contribute to the picture that is emerging on the development of community managed libraries and provide a useful overview of the experiences of some of the volunteers involved in community managed libraries.

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## This research

This report is based on a small-scale study that the NFWI conducted with volunteers involved in community managed libraries in either an administrative or service-facing capacity. It draws on a series of telephone interviews and an independently facilitated focus group.

This report does not seek to define 'community managed' or 'community run' library. It is clear that many of those operating as community managed libraries can differ dramatically. Local approaches vary enormously and a variety of governance and delivery models are available. For the purpose of this research paper we have concentrated on those libraries in which volunteers

play a major role in the delivery of services and operate at arms-length from the local authority.

The paper draws on the experiences of thirteen representatives from seven different libraries to provide a snapshot of the experiences of some of the volunteers involved in the community managed library network. While there were significant variations in the way that these services were delivered, there were also some similarities. The following gives a flavour of what some of the community managed libraries that participated in the focus group looked like:

- The majority of the libraries were run by volunteers with no paid

staff.

- Most of the community managed libraries were based in rural communities. One was an inner city community library.
- All the community managed libraries we spoke to had some degree of interaction with their local authority, although the relationships varied significantly from library to library. This included the financial support and practical assistance they were afforded, their statutory status and the existence of service agreements.
- Each community managed library had developed in response to local authority service cuts or decisions to scale back the library service.

## From Paper...

### **Volunteering in libraries and the growth of community managed libraries**

Research conducted by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in 2012 showed that over 50% of responding local authorities were considering alternative methods of library governance and service provision. As at 31st March 2012, CILIP estimated that 61 community managed libraries were operating, and predicted 129 could be in operation by March 2013<sup>1</sup>. Other estimates suggest the network's growth has been more extensive. This has been confirmed by Arts Council commissioned research, expected to be published in January 2013, that suggests 170 community supported libraries are currently in operation and 425 libraries are expected to have significant levels of support from volunteers by April 2013<sup>2</sup>.

Figures from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) show that volunteering rose dramatically in 2010/11 with the total number of volunteers in UK libraries growing by 22% to 21,494 people. This was followed by a further increase of just under 9% over 2011-12<sup>3</sup>. While the figures don't directly correlate, over the last year, the number of staff in UK libraries dropped by 8% to 21,780.

### **The policy context**

*At a national level there are indications that community managed library provision is garnering increasing support, combining as it does, the Government's vision of localism with the need for public sector efficiency savings.*

reform suggested that community services should be devolved to the most local level possible and suggested that more discretion for councils could create "huge social value from engaging a community in running its own library...while also saving large amounts of money on over-skilled paid staff, poor use of space and unnecessary stock"<sup>4</sup>. In evidence to the Culture Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry into library closures in 2012, the Libraries Minister Ed Vaizey MP expressed his opinion that volunteers provide a huge opportunity for professional librarians, and highlighted the positive aspects that have emerged for some libraries when they are taken over by the community – for example

increased opening hours and a better book stock. Meanwhile, the Cabinet Office, along with the Reading Agency, has recently announced its intention to create a "Youth Innovation Network" of librarians, which aims to generate thousands of volunteer librarian opportunities and is funded by a £127,000 grant from the Social Action Fund.

The Arts Council England, the body responsible for supporting and developing libraries, has undertaken research into community managed libraries, expected to be published in early 2013. The report will seek to set out guiding principles for local authorities and elected members who

<sup>1</sup> CILIP (2012) A Changing Landscape, London

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Farrington (2012) Twelve per cent of libraries soon to have significant community support, The Bookseller [online] 12 December Available at: <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/twelve-cent-all-libraries-to-have-significant-community-support.html> [Accessed 19 December 2012]

<sup>3</sup> CIPFA (2012) CIPFA Public Library Actuals survey 2011-12, London

<sup>4</sup> KPMG (2010) Payment for Success – How to shift power from Whitehall to public service customers, London

are considering supplementing their service with community run models. This will follow on from work on community managed libraries conducted by the Museums, Libraries and Archive Council (MLA) that looked at issues and opportunities facing local authorities who considered that there might be a place for community run libraries within the wider library service.

Anecdotal evidence from our focus

group also suggested a change in sentiment towards community managed libraries on a local level. Several volunteers at our focus group described the attitude of the local authority shifting from one of reticence, given that many of the community managed libraries had initially sprung out of campaigners joining in common cause to oppose service closures, towards one of cooperation. Most felt that this was

because other libraries were likely to follow their lead in the future, with the local authority believing that there was something to be learned and gained from existing community run libraries in their locality.

All these factors suggest that community managed libraries are increasingly likely to be viewed and utilised as an alternative means to deliver library services in the future.

## The statutory context

“It shall be the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof”

*Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964*

Section 7 of The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 places a statutory duty on library authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service to all persons in the area that want to make use of it. What constitutes ‘comprehensive’ and ‘efficient’ is subject to rigorous debate and largely left for individual local authorities to interpret at their discretion, with few precedents existing to guide them.

The relationship between community managed libraries and local authorities differs widely both between and within authorities. Many community managed libraries will be integrated within the council’s library service – with access to the library management system and library book stock – and will have agreements in place with the local authority. However,

their position under the 1964 Act, and the corresponding obligations that they are required to fulfil, will vary and often remains unclear.

This was apparent in written evidence submitted to the recent Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry into library closures, where the approaches of local authorities towards community managed libraries and their position under the 1964 Act varied considerably. Some explicitly stated that community managed libraries did not fall within their statutory remit – for example the Isle of Wight maintained that five recently established community managed libraries were there to supplement the statutory service. In contrast, Doncaster County Council, having outsourced 12 of its libraries to the community, considered these libraries

to form part of its statutory service. Other local authorities, such as Newcastle City Council, appeared to favour a middle ground – stating that a professional service would be required for statutory provision, but that the community could play a valuable supplementary role.

The evidence from our focus group was similarly diverse. While most of the volunteers who participated believed that they were not considered a statutory service for the purpose of the 1964 Act, one library did hint that the local authority were trying to bring them back within their statutory provision – an approach that was demonstrated by other community managed libraries in evidence to the Select Committee inquiry. Other participants were unaware of the 1964 Act or of their status under it.



## To Practice...

### **Local authority support**

The degree of support given by local authorities to community managed libraries will vary and appears to veer from fairly comprehensive to virtually non-existent. This will have implications for the volunteer experience, the sort of service that will be provided, and the capacity of the volunteers to provide that service.

Every volunteer who participated in the focus group reported that their library received varying degrees of assistance from local authorities, making it clear that there was a problematic lack of consistency in approach. For the most part, volunteers seemed somewhat dissatisfied by the level of support offered to them by the local authority.

This diverse approach means that the ability of these libraries to provide certain services is likely to vary dramatically. Consequently standards are also likely to vary. This also has implications for the ability of the community to deliver these services, for example communities with a high density of retired professionals are much better equipped in terms of time and resource to deliver a community managed library service than those in other areas such as urban communities or more deprived areas. This was repeatedly acknowledged in our focus group where participants reflected on the high levels of social capital that

they had been able to draw on in getting the libraries off the ground. Participants explained that having a diverse network of available volunteers was critical to the success of the community managed library. It also made fundraising and attracting book donations much easier – many reported that they had had an excess of book donations.

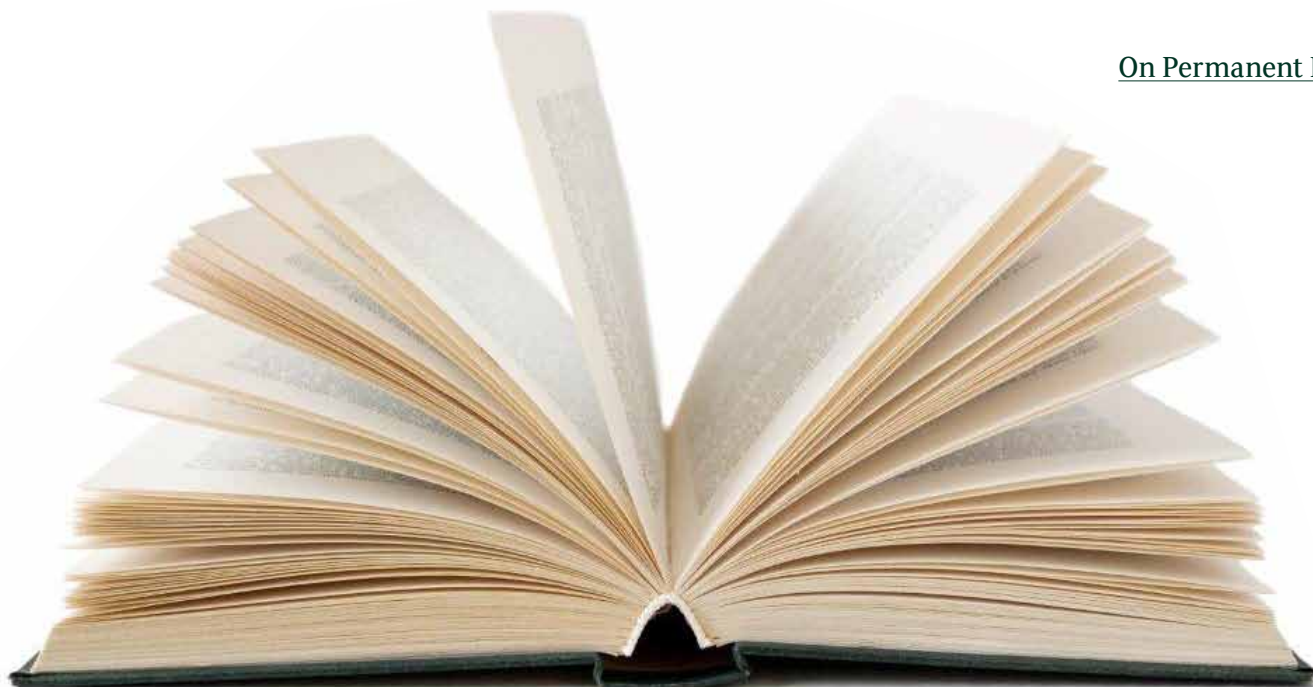
*“I was oversubscribed with volunteer books. I’ve got a barn full. A friend’s got a barn full, you know, we just have far too many.”*

Several volunteers also felt that in some instances where support was provided by the local authority, it was badly targeted. There were several examples of community managed libraries having to loan IT equipment from the

local authority as part of their agreements, but in many instances this was outdated and if the equipment required attention, it had to be done by an engineer contracted by the local authority and this assistance was often slow in coming. This was extremely frustrating for the community managed libraries who encountered this issue, as not only did they feel that a robust computing system was a key requirement in delivering an effective library service, but also that the money they were spending on loaning computers from the library authority could be better spent if they were able to invest in their own machines rather than having to rely on local authority equipment.

*“We have very poor quality machines and although we as a group of villagers would provide new equipment, we’re not allowed to.”*

The volunteers acknowledged their understanding of the reasons for this,



yet felt it illustrated the disconnect that seemed to exist between local authorities and community managed libraries in their areas.

Some of the community managed libraries that had been established for longer had experienced the local authority's attitude towards them change in recent months. Where the change had been a positive one, most reported they had begun to attribute this to an increased interest in alternative models of library provision. One participant explained how the volunteers felt that a "sudden surge in enthusiasm" from the local authority had "...something to do with the fact that they wanted to close 14 more communities down and they desperately needed us to work with them to help these community libraries because otherwise, the whole thing would have just gone flat on its face...".

Another noted the change in approach from the local authority "...wasn't an accident. The day they don't need us, all the support will disappear, I guarantee it."

Others explained how local authority support had fallen off almost completely:

*"They used to come regularly...maybe twice a year, and have a meeting in the library so they could see how we were operating."*

*"I think we have just been left to our own devices."*

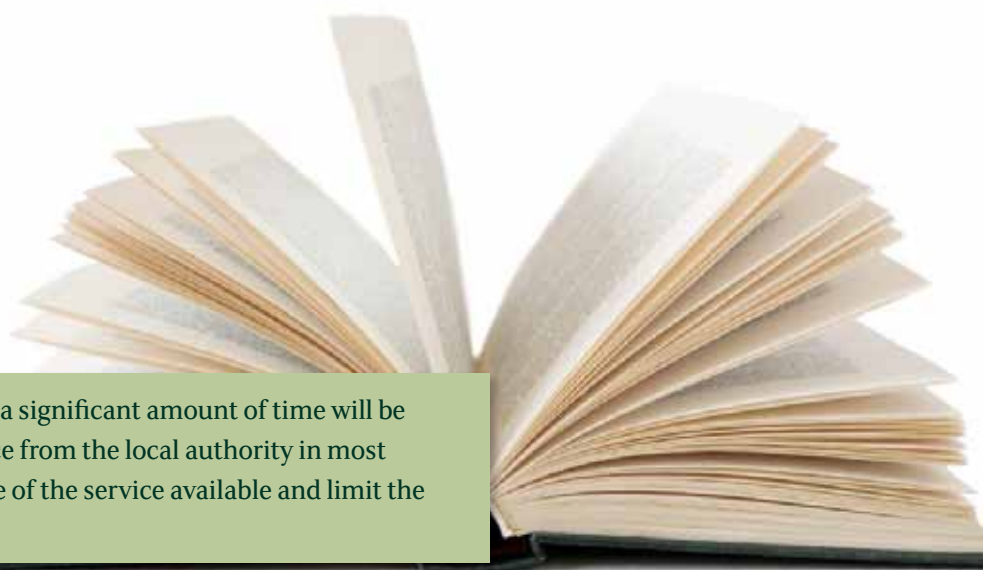
*"They don't even come out and visit us anymore."*

The lack of trust and level of disillusionment existing towards the local authorities was somewhat concerning. Regardless of whether a service is supplementary, or part of the statutory network, a joined-up library service is one which gives the most benefits to users. The potential fracturing of the relationship between community managed libraries and the public library service will only mean the availability of fewer services for users. A good example of this was with interlibrary loans. Many of the community managed libraries we spoke to were reliant on book donations and fundraising to

replenish and keep their stock updated. Many claimed a more up-to-date and better book stock as a consequence. But, because many of the books were donated or bought using funds raised within the community, community managed libraries were often reluctant to respond to requests for interlibrary loans and could refuse these requests if they wished to do so. This was most succinctly put by one of the participants of our focus group, who explained:

*"Because we own all of our own books and because the money is raised locally to buy them, we reached an agreement with the County that all of our stock is non-reservable so we have access to the full County catalogue and if you look on the County catalogue, you can see our books but against them it says non-reservable but our customers are equally welcome to look at the catalogue and they could reserve anything from the whole County stock. So it's sort of, not quite a one-way street."*

In practical terms, this could mean that a member of the public who frequents a community managed library will be able to access a wider range of books than those who access publicly run libraries.



## Accessing funding

Funding is a major concern for volunteers and a significant amount of time will be spent on fundraising. With very little assistance from the local authority in most cases, accessing funding will impact the nature of the service available and limit the ability of volunteers to deliver other services.

The degree of funding available to community managed libraries differed radically and appeared to be dependent on the degree of assistance provided by the local authority, as well as the fundraising efforts of the local community. Some community managed libraries reported that they had been given quite considerable funding by the local authority, or a long-term contract to use the building at a peppercorn rent – giving them some security to develop and enhance the library service. Others acknowledged that they were at risk of being given notice on their premises with very little warning.

Despite most of the libraries we spoke to having some financial reserves, the continued acquisition of funds was a major concern to all of them. Every community managed library involved in the research identified funding as a major obstacle to the ongoing and future viability of their library.

We asked our focus group about financial planning. It was clear that most of the libraries had some form of financial planning in place, but uncertainty about the future – largely down to factors beyond the volunteers' control such as the continued use of the premises – meant

that making decisions about planning and investment was difficult. Some community managed libraries explained that they had funding available but were reluctant to invest those funds because of the type of agreements that they had in place with the council. One of the much smaller community managed libraries had no planning in place at all and relied on more of a subsistence existence:

*“We don't have any actual planning... I do worry about it all the time actually.”*

Suggestions that some community managed libraries could be made statutory services by some local authorities also had implications for fundraising – which community managed libraries are almost wholly dependent on. As one participant in our focus group explained:

*“With statutory, you haven't got a hope. Why would anybody give a grant to a government organisation?”*

It also had implications for accessing grants and in order to qualify for tax breaks:

*“...when you are a non-council body, a whole pile of things start to be available.”*

## Meeting users' needs

Despite meeting users' needs being a key requirement for the public library service, the extent to which a corresponding obligation exists for community managed libraries is unclear. This is likely to remain the case as long as the status and responsibilities of community managed libraries remain ambiguous. This not only has implications for users' needs but risks leaving a tier of library services outside the network, operating with limited accountability, in isolation from a local authority's strategic vision for the service, yet feeling the weight of responsibility that comes with delivering an important community service.

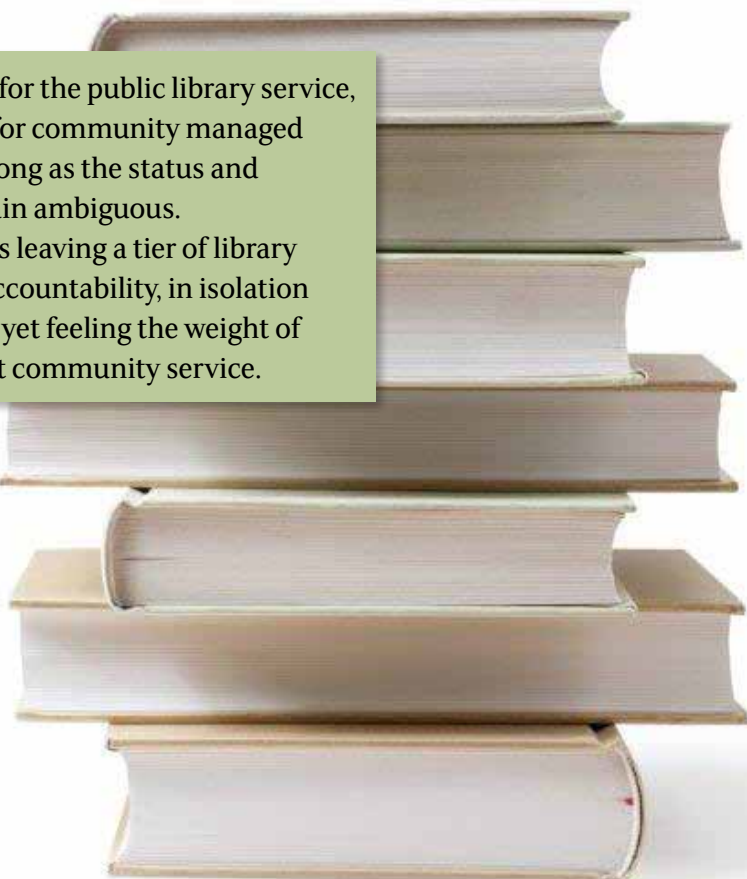
For community managed libraries that fall outside the statutory service, there will presumably be no requirement on the local authority to substantively assess how they are meeting the needs of all potential users. While most community managed library volunteers we spoke to were required to produce an annual report and demonstrate that they were meeting certain targets (which primarily revolved around increasing membership and loan targets) it was not clear how this material was used and how the libraries fitted into the authorities' wider vision for the service:

*"We've got a service agreement with them and we've got targets...although we're non- statutory."*

*"They could close us down if we didn't meet those targets."*

As community managed services become more widely available, there is a risk that a two-tier service will evolve, with many communities accessing library services that fall outside the national network with few common service standards and little systematic assessment of users' needs.

Community managed library volunteers already have a huge amount of work administering and fundraising for their library. The concern is that in trying to meet their local authority targets and attract users to the library, community managed libraries will concentrate on these aspects by reaching out to the most common user groups and, in doing so, fail to address those with specific needs or reach more marginalised groups.



Focus group participants explained how the book stock selection was usually decided by the managing committee of the library. One community managed library volunteer described how the book stock was updated after the library was taken over by the community to reflect the largely middle class demographic of the area, with user satisfaction and membership numbers increasing correspondingly. While there was a need to target book stock to adequately satisfy users in this instance, the library had clearly evolved and developed around the interests and requirements of a particular section of that community and concerns remain that those with less resource and capacity to organise and articulate their needs will not see them met.

There is clearly a limit to the extent to which voluntary groups can reasonably be expected to serve the community in the holistic way that would be expected



*There is a risk that many community managed libraries will be unable to provide the level of service that communities expect*

from a professionally delivered service. Regardless of whether community managed libraries are in operation, local authorities are expected to be able to demonstrate that the library service as a whole is meeting statutory responsibilities, yet where community managed libraries are operating at a disconnect from the wider public library service, there is a risk that many community managed libraries will be unable to provide the level of service that may be expected by the local community.

All the community managed library volunteers that were involved in the research were clearly discharging their duties with the utmost diligence and were extremely conscientious in

addressing the needs of their community. Many explained how being part of their community meant that they had a higher regard for those people who came in and were often able to provide a more personal service:

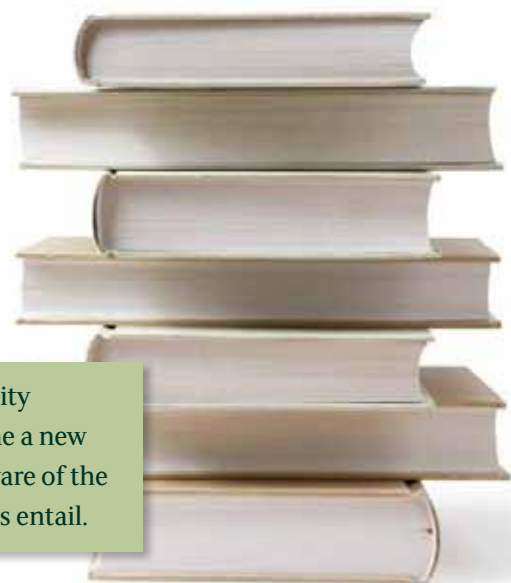
*“I came to the conclusion that what we have is a great opportunity because the research that I did when I first started indicated that this wasn’t just a book-lending source, it was a community facility. It was a hub for all sorts of things that were going on from the guy who turns up every morning because it’s the only place he can go in the world, right the way through to the young mums and entertainment for kids.”*

They also spoke of increased levels of

outreach engagement to try to attract new users to the library, and the majority had conducted user surveys to help inform this. However, this system very much relies on the integrity and impartiality of volunteers and, as the number of community managed libraries continues to increase, and as more are made part of the statutory service, it is questionable whether local authorities will be able to adequately assess whether these libraries are addressing the needs of users. If the needs of a community are not being adequately evaluated, then access to the library could be significantly restricted for a large proportion of the population.

## Limited mechanisms for volunteers to share best practice

Limited guidance is available to volunteers who are setting up a community managed library. This means that services are being redesigned every time a new community managed library is set up and that volunteers are often unaware of the huge demands and range of responsibilities that their new voluntary roles entail.



Despite the varying experiences of each library in their set up and administration, all faced very similar challenges in achieving their aims. All the focus group participants agreed it was useful to have the opportunity as a group to get together to share experiences, discuss challenges and explore best practice solutions. The increasing number of community managed libraries demonstrates the commitment and appetite on the part of volunteers to maintain their library services when they come under threat of closure. Yet despite this, there is currently limited guidance in place and few satisfactory mechanisms for sharing best practice. In effect, many volunteers are finding themselves designing the service delivery mechanism for a community managed library every time a new library is set up.

This does have some benefits – it can mean that there is greater scope to mould the community managed library into one that fits the needs of the community it serves – but the reality is that many volunteers proceeding on an undertaking such as this do not have the expertise that would be expected of professionals and would, therefore, benefit from guidance. When trying to access advice on setting up a service, most community managed libraries reported limited assistance from the local authority to do so. This meant that volunteers reverted to seeking advice from other existing community managed libraries or, as seemed to be more often the case, working out the process for themselves as they went along. One community managed library we spoke to had had so many enquiries that they had even produced their own guidance notes for other

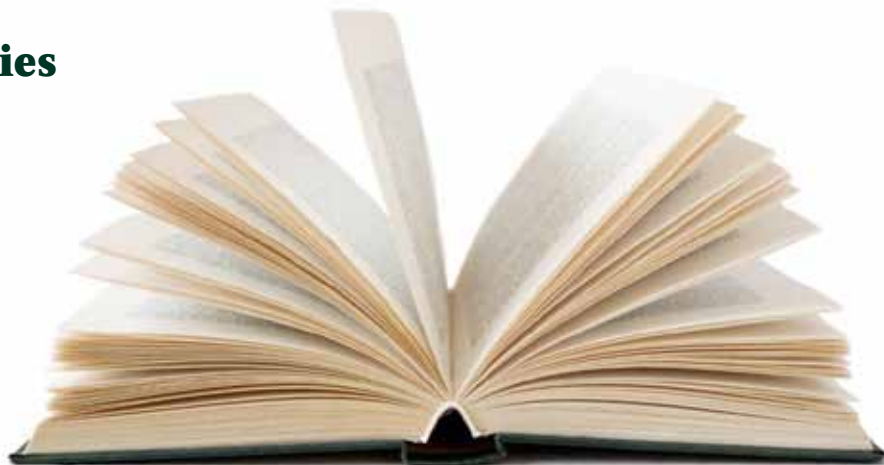
volunteers. However, even with this limited guidance in place, at the outset it is difficult for volunteers to appreciate the diversity of the task as well as the sheer work and responsibility that setting up and running a community managed library entails:

*“You need a treasurer and you need a secretary...You’re going to need other people to manage volunteers, induct volunteers and so it goes on.”*

*“(The main skill that you need is) commitment...And PR...the right calibre of people...people who are involved with other...community groups...You need people with common sense...And expertise...Computer skills...Accountancy...How to run a business actually.”*

## The ‘volunteer managing’ committee’s responsibilities

Significant responsibility is being placed on community run library volunteer managers and specific skills will be required if they are to discharge these responsibilities effectively. It is often only once the library is set up that there is a full appreciation of intricacies of the role and this has implications for volunteer succession.



The majority of community managed libraries we encountered were run completely by volunteers. They had established formal structures, developed governance systems and required a level of expertise to administer them. We heard repeatedly that the management team were effectively undertaking roles that in other facilities, paid professional staff would be expected to perform. Notably this seemed to be taking place in isolation from effective support mechanisms.

Participants in our focus group highlighted the difficulties of having total reliance on a volunteer management team, as one contributor explained:

*“We are up to our neck in volunteers. The big danger is a succession of team because we depend heavily on key people and if those key people go, we haven’t got some form of succession in place. (The library is) dead, basically.”*

It seems that because community run libraries are such an unknown quantity,

many of those who get involved at their initiation don’t necessarily realise the degree of responsibility that will be required of them and this also relates back to the lack of best practice guidance and clarity about volunteer role requirements.

This lack of support was accentuated by unrealistic demands being placed on volunteers by the local authority. We heard from one community run library in our focus group who were given three weeks to produce an annual report:

*“They asked us to provide a written Annual Report this year. They gave us three weeks’ notice, a long, long list of questions. We could have given them the information but it all needed to be collated, at the same time that there was a new library management system coming on board.”*

The volunteers we spoke to had mixed experiences when it came to recruiting and retaining ‘front line’ volunteers. Many explained that they had no difficulty with recruiting willing

volunteers to help out on the library floor for a couple of hours a week – and in fact often had too many volunteers. Others highlighted concerns about the sustainability of the services, given the reliance on volunteers:

*“We’re all getting older, we are not getting any healthier, and who knows? ...it could be a real issue.”*

Where there are plenty of volunteers on hand, maintaining a certain, and consistent, level of service is not too difficult – many of our focus group participants agreed that they had a big enough pool of volunteers to call on if there were any issues with manning the library. However, for community run libraries which were reliant on a much smaller pool of volunteers, this became more fraught. An inner city community run library we spoke to serving a deprived area explained that recruiting volunteers was particularly difficult. The library representative recognised the importance of ensuring a diverse volunteer network was in place to be able to respond to the needs of the local community, yet difficulties with

volunteer recruitment meant the library service struggled to represent the community it served.

Those in charge of administering community managed libraries also explained that there were difficulties around the degree of responsibility that could be justifiably placed on the volunteers they managed. Everyone at the focus group explained that they had a minimum of two volunteers working at their library at any given time. They felt that to do otherwise would be unfair on the volunteers working in the library.

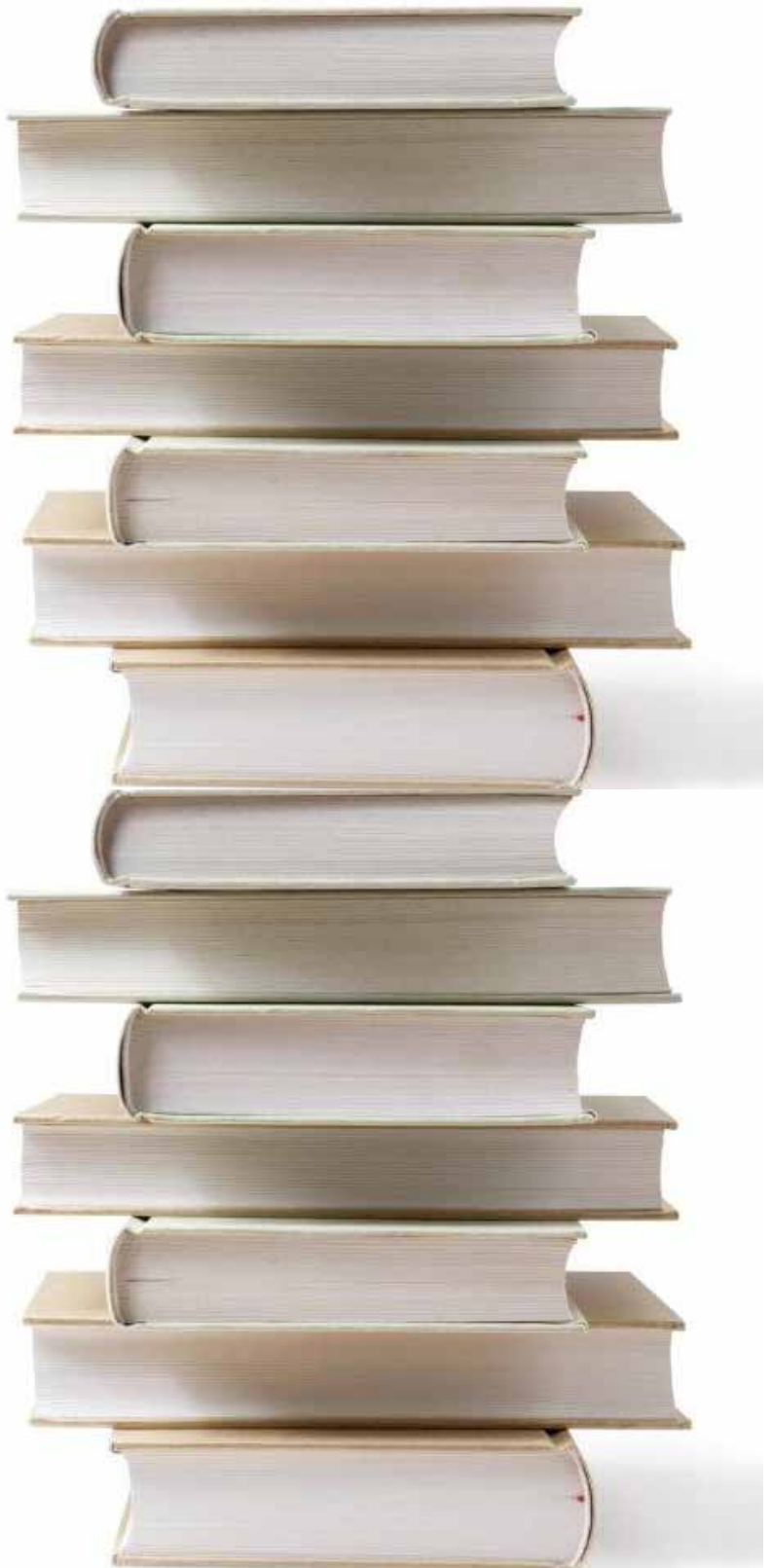
With significant challenges presenting in areas that were relatively well resourced, it is questionable how realistic community managed libraries would be in more deprived areas and how sustainable they are likely to be in the long-term. Participants reflected on how the relative affluence of their areas had meant the volunteers had a wide range of skills and social capital to draw on to ensure the expertise was in place to get the projects off the ground:

*“We had to present a constitution...a sort of legal document to the County Council...we had trained businessmen who got together and set up our constitution.”*

Another participant described how a local writer had volunteered to “do all of the indexing”. And another how local volunteers had advised on attaining charitable status:

*“I don't think it was paid financial advice, somebody knew somebody who knew somebody – you know within a village you've usually got someone who can give you advice so I don't think we had to pay for any of it.”*

Many of the participants in the focus groups had clearly had to be extremely resourceful to get the services off the ground. Yet in the long-term, it is not clear that the network of volunteers who are willing to step in and run these services exists and this begs the question of whether community managed libraries really are a sustainable solution. This is of increasing concern as more and more volunteers are stepping up to take on community managed libraries.

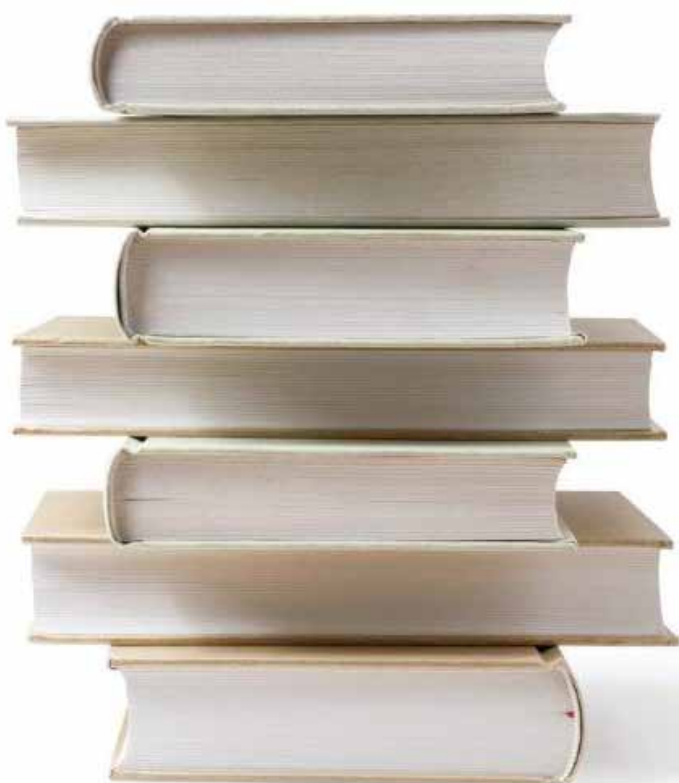




## Ensuring volunteers have the right support

A lack of support from local authorities means that volunteers are confused about the training and legal requirements with which they need to comply to adequately discharge their responsibilities. This is a cause of great anxiety to volunteers who cannot be expected to have the expertise or resources to make these assessments.

It was apparent from our research that there was very limited guidance around meeting operational requirements and legal obligations, including which of those the volunteers did and didn't have to satisfy. The position of most of the community managed libraries that we spoke to, outside of the core network, meant that while codes of conduct were often in place, the libraries were not formally accountable to the local authority. While all were clearly delivering on their responsibilities conscientiously, it was clear that many had found the experience something



of an obstacle course and would have welcomed additional support and guidance:

*“We’re looking at (health and safety requirements and policies) very carefully now...we had a little situation just a few weeks ago when a child...burned her hand...Now, nothing happened but it could have. We are looking very, very carefully at that.”*

Questions about the libraries’ obligations extended to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for those working with vulnerable adults and children, data protection rules regarding access to the library lending system, health and safety regulations, and insurance. While a certain level of variation extends to library authorities – for example in relation to CRB checks – local authority policy will be decided with the assistance of professional advice depending on the particular services that are being delivered. During the focus group discussion, participants gave accounts of some local authorities that provided limited guidance on legal requirements, but on the whole it seemed to be then left up to the community managed library to disentangle what this meant for them in practical terms. To give an example from our focus group of some of the legal issues that volunteers had to consider, one participant explained:

*“There’s asbestos issues that need to be dealt with. If you are on your own, but there’s no paid staff there, what happens if there’s a fire? Who is the fire marshal? Risk assessments, normally you need to have your training risk assessments, routine service and fire alarm checks and smoke detectors. There’s a whole plethora of legislation. Now it doesn’t need to be really deep but it’s there and if anything happens... then they drill down... you can be assured that you are responsible for something.”*

Despite this understanding that liability existed, there was confusion as to which guidance volunteers did and didn’t have to comply with:

*“I think technically, health and safety doesn’t apply unless you’ve got paid staff but I mean not that you shouldn’t do it but... you would get into deep trouble for not being sensible.”*

This variation also extended to training, with every

*“...they only trained two out of 20 people... we had to cascade the training down to all our volunteers.”*

community managed library we spoke to interpreting training requirements differently, with the assistance provided by local authorities also differing. In our experience, the training provided by the library authority was limited and was usually left to volunteers:

*“... you are going to need people to manage volunteers, induct volunteers and so it goes on...”*

We also heard of instances – for example relating to the library management system – where training was given to one or two volunteers who were then required to train others:

*“...they only trained two out of 20 people... we had to cascade the training down to all our volunteers.”*

We heard of one community managed library whose training comprised of a self-assessment checklist which volunteers had to tick off once they were confident they understood how to perform various tasks or skills.

Relying on this sort of training can be problematic and where training is not

adequately discharged, consequences are potentially serious. For example, most of the community managed libraries we spoke to had access to the full library lending system and related data – including names and addresses of borrowers. It is important that volunteers have an adequate understanding of their responsibilities regarding data protection and are equipped to develop appropriate policies to meet these requirements.

It is concerning that the lack of guidance available to community managed libraries regarding training and legal requirements leaves volunteers – at best – vulnerable and, at worst, potentially liable. This is not only worrying – both for the well-meaning volunteer and library user, but also unfair. During the focus group, when asked if they worry about the legal side of running a community library all of the volunteers expressed some degree of concern. One said: “we think of nothing else”. The fact that it remained untested added to this, effectively creating a scenario of ‘what if’.

# Conclusions

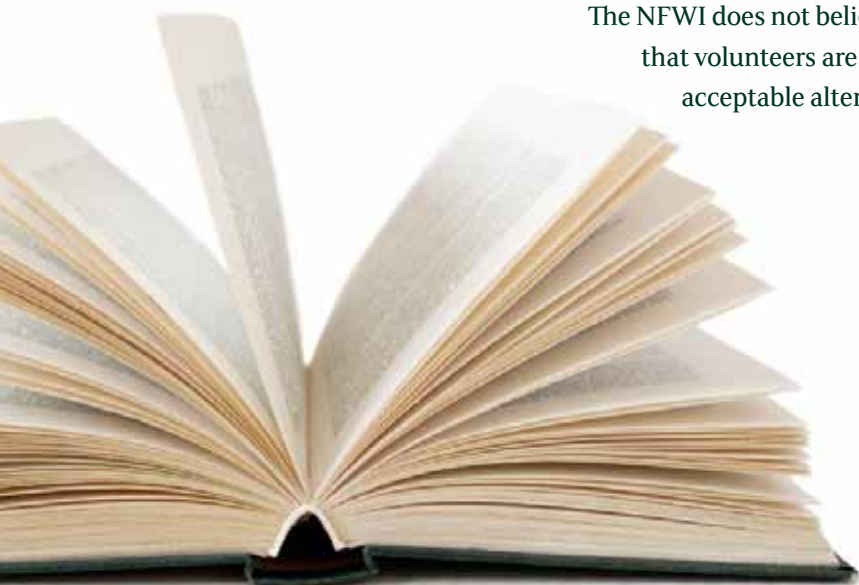
There are valuable lessons that service providers should learn from some of the difficulties that existing community managed libraries have experienced, some of which have been captured in this document.

Public libraries are a huge asset to any community, and the fact that numerous communities have gone to great lengths to prevent library services from closing down demonstrates this. However, only certain communities have the resources to effectively set up and run a library and we are concerned that the proliferation of these models could effectively lead to a 'postcode lottery' of library services with the creation of a two-tiered system of library provision that undermines the benefits of skilled and trained library staff and underestimates the role that they play in both delivering an effective public service and supporting communities.

The testing economic environment has meant that library services have not been immune to local authority budgetary cuts. While there are many examples of innovation and creativity as the service has evolved to meet this challenge, it is also clear that the development of community managed libraries has been reactive. If, as looks increasingly likely, more libraries are going to be set up with a greater element of community involvement, this piecemeal approach is clearly not fit for purpose.

Many community managed libraries have been established in response to difficult choices and participants talked about the impossible situation they had found themselves in when told by the council that "we are taking your library away". One participant recalled how the absence of discussion and debate had "really motivated the community" and others talked about the "conundrum" they faced, given their awareness that the choice was to take on the library or lose the facility entirely.

The NFWI does not believe that volunteers are an acceptable alternative



## Opportunities

While this report reflects many of the challenges that were central to the focus group discussion, it is clear that these challenges only present part of the picture. There are huge opportunities for community managed libraries; putting the community in the driving seat means that they can tailor services to the needs of the community and adapt and react as the community changes. Less red tape can mean they can do this quickly and for less money.

Many of the volunteers that we spoke to firmly believed that basic service delivery such as opening times, the quality and variety of books and outreach services had improved when the library was taken over by the community. Others cited examples of how the facilities were used much more flexibly and fully by communities. There were libraries organising film nights, leasing out space to raise money for community projects and ensure the building was being fully utilised.

All the libraries we spoke to, saw having a library as an opportunity which should not be lost easily. As a participant explained:

*"I came to the conclusion that what we have is a great opportunity because the research that I did when I first started indicated that this wasn't just a book-lending source, it was a community facility. It was a hub for all sorts of things that were going on from the guy who turns up every morning because it's the only place he can go in the world, right the way through to the young mums and entertainment for kids. But if you've got a building and you've got a bunch of people, then the world is your oyster because you can do anything you like."*

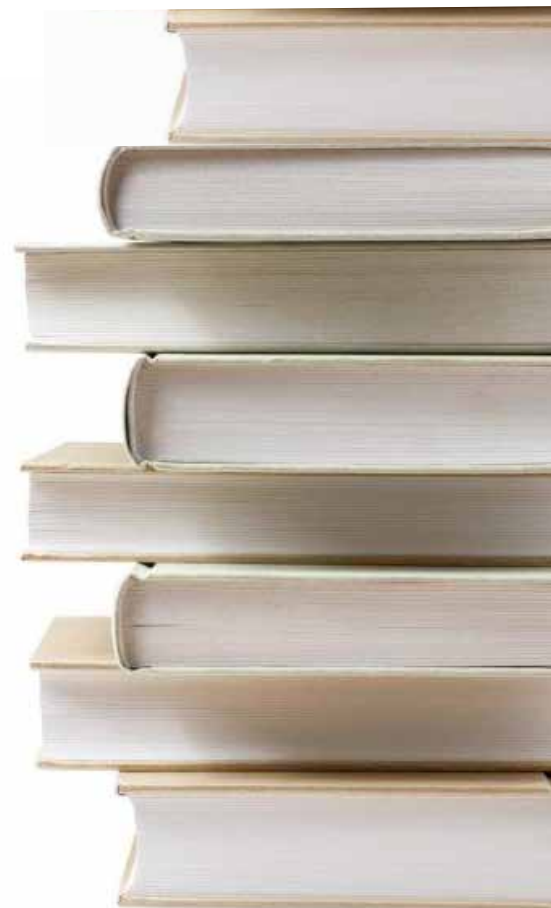
to paid library staff, yet at the same time volunteers can and do make a tremendous contribution to the network. The diversity and range of demands placed on volunteers – some of which we have covered in this document – risks diluting the professionalism of the service and placing an unsustainable burden on volunteers. Professional support is key. This could well come in different formats as different models evolve. Community managed libraries now form a significant part of library service provision and it is clear that many are thriving and serving their communities well. Given the likely expansion of these models, it is critical that they are afforded an appropriate level of support and guidance.

*Volunteers at all levels need to be given adequate training, advice and support*

## Recommendations

- In the interest of users, library professionals and volunteers, there needs to be an honest discussion, spearheaded by the Government, about whether and how community managed libraries will fit into the overall library service with corresponding guidance for local authorities. Volunteers have an important role to play yet there is a danger they will reach saturation point and in relying on volunteers to deliver day to day services, we risk losing sight of the added value that volunteers can bring to the service more widely, for example through assisting with reading schemes.
- Too many community managed libraries seem to be operating at a level of disconnection from the local authority. In effect this is distancing the community managed library from the wider vision behind the public library network as well as the practical resources, provision and service planning that is central to a good library service. Where community managed libraries exist, local authorities must clearly articulate where they fit into the wider library service vision and practical delivery of the overall library service. Adequate provision to accommodate community managed libraries must be made.
- Volunteers at all levels need to be given adequate training, advice and support if they are expected to deliver library services. If the local authority deems it appropriate for a library to be taken over by the community, it needs to provide comprehensive support and guidance, at a minimum, a memorandum of understanding so that volunteers appreciate what is and isn't required of them, and adequate guidance so that volunteers aren't having to design the service from scratch.
- Community managed libraries

should be better integrated within the library service and be afforded the same opportunities across the authority. They should have the support of a professional librarian.





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