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## Making savings: the future of public libraries

**With the public library service continuing to face unprecedented challenges Janene Cox, Yinnon Ezra and Graeme McDonald, library experts all, have collaborated to offer advice on making savings in public libraries.**

The public library service is one of the most highly valued 'choose to use' public services in England. It is frequented by millions of people, covering the whole age range, all ethnic backgrounds, and geographical spread. There is a public library or an access point to the service near you.

Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 local councils are required to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" public library service. This responsibility is superintended by the secretary of state for culture, media and sport, who holds an "intervention/investigation power". A local authority that has been deemed by their local communities to have failed in their "statutory duty" could be investigated. This process is guided by complex legal issues which involve lengthy argument, public hearings and evidence, sometimes taking many months to draw to a conclusion.

One of the main issues (qv John Sharland's work Library Closures: Learning the Lessons) emerging from this for local councils is communication, a process that can reveal or obscure poor consultation, a lack of feedback to citizens, the lack of a coherent plan for these services and the requirement to find economies.

Some cash for schools and social care come from government through the annual grant to local authorities, linked to clear expectations about performance and accountability. The picture for public libraries is more complex. For some councils, most of the cash to fund the service is raised through the council tax, hence there are no immediate levers that can be pulled in Whitehall to deliver compliance to a particular standard of service. Over many years governments, through other acts of parliament or 'direction', have urged local authorities to devolve services to local people and encouraged new models of service delivery. More recently, through the localism agenda, the government is creating an environment that promotes greater community involvement, an environment in which the public library clearly has an important role.

Many local authorities would argue that making savings particularly around cultural services, the label under which public libraries find themselves, is not a new phenomenon. These services, which often include arts, archives, heritage and museums, parks and leisure to mention a few (the latter having no statutory duty attached to them) always struggle to attract recourses but do better when grant from government for the other main services is steady or expanding. When this is reduced the impact is more direct, particularly when the regional variation in grant distribution is included.

Even against this background there are outstanding examples of local authorities who have invested imaginatively in public libraries. This has taken place across the country, in small and larger councils, making a decisive local impact. The pattern is one of improved building stock, new libraries, tailored opening hours, providing access to other

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**"Communication is the key and it has to be relentless. The setting out of possible options clearly and honestly with a transparent analysis about costs and possible savings should be encouraged"**

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relevant services, free Wi-Fi, extensive digital resources, improving the links with learning and voluntary organisations; this is not an exhaustive list.

Many of these innovations have also addressed the decline in both book lending and visits. By designing these improvements in partnership with local people, some of whom may not be regular library users, some local authorities have been able to reverse or at least reduce this trend.

The public libraries service is local and therefore very diverse. This is hugely positive. As the communities libraries serve are all different there is no 'one size fits all' solution. This diversity follows through into how "reductions" are managed. One approach to savings is to look at a year-on-year percentage cut, the salami-slicing approach, and some local authorities have been open about the various savings options they wish to introduce with real effort being put into engaging communities.

Others have developed robust plans to co-locate, relocate and reduce the administration of the service. Proactive approaches to sharing with either neighbouring councils or a county working with a borough are producing new ways of making the best possible use of local resources. Where this has been achieved local customers perceive little or no difference in service quality or that it is still being managed by their familiar, accountable local council. In future years this process will need to accelerate to deliver the growing scale of savings required and barriers between councils, both personal and political, will need to be overcome.

There is also the traditional approach to savings in some local authorities, which has not changed in many years: cut the book funds, reduce opening hours, reduce the building maintenance budget and potentially close libraries. It is this approach that must be addressed as it leads to a gradual diminishing of service, not transformation, reducing access, content and eventually relevance.

Some local authorities having taken these decisions at the beginning of the budget discussions and have found themselves, because of public opposition, unable to take them further. This has the effect of freezing the service in time, making them immune to change for the foreseeable future.

The important first step for any local authorities should be a clearly expressed vision for the public library service. This must be informed by the views of local people. It is not about recycling the views of existing users but ensuring that the vision embraces those who do not or will not use the service. This must also suggest how these aspirations will be met. Collecting this information can sometimes be a challenge but many councils have wide experience of testing the quality of services through regular citizen surveys; the use of good, inexpensive market research is also worthwhile.

Finding savings in public libraries is complex. The issues start with a set of fixed assets, be they the number of buildings needing staff with quantifying support costs like IT, human resources, and include corporate costs arising from being part of local democracy. Given that it is fundamental to deciding on the financial targets being set, getting to the bottom of what the services costs is crucial and difficult to disaggregate. However, it needs to be done accurately. This may sound like an obvious step but many local authorities find this difficult, often coming out with a set of figures that change during the heat of public scrutiny and debate.

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about costs and possible savings should be encouraged; this analysis could include examples of how savings could be made through reductions in tiers of staffing, shared services with others or partnerships with community groups. It is important that any analysis is done openly, shared with staff and local communities so everyone has the same data set.

It is after this process that decisions should be taken about the future. There should be a clear timetable. On implementation it is worth reviewing what has been done, checking that it meets the set objectives in the vision, including how it will attract new users and deliver the savings. Consider setting out what success looks like with a set of possible intelligent local indicators – not outputs – that demonstrate whether the service is making progress.

These simple steps are not profound or new but they are inclusive and involve local communities in a process which is transparent and creates the opportunity for genuine consensus. Where this is not possible, at least the issues will have been well debated with the council seen to have listened and been making its decisions on the best analysis. The approach will require flexibility and openness from all concerned as a different service will emerge.

Janene Cox is commissioner for tourism and the cultural county at Staffordshire county council and chair of the Society of Chief Librarians.

Yinnon Ezra MBE MA FRSA is public library adviser at the Department for Culture Media and Sport and is at pains to point out that these are his personal views and not those of the DCMS.

Graeme Mc Donald is chief executive of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives.

#### References:

(1) Library Closures: Learning the Lessons by John Sharland  
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#### ***The Leisure Review, September 2013***

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