

Local Authority Library and Leisure Services – Community Managed Libraries National Peer Network Response

The Community Managed Libraries National Peer Network helps community managed libraries (CMLs) to run effectively and successfully by sharing ideas, learning, experiences and inspiration.

No one understands community managed libraries better than the people and communities who fought to retain their local libraries and related services their communities want and need. We are from the full spectrum of CMLs including independently funded to those who receive local authority support. Our primary members are trustees or people who work in community managed libraries but can also include those wishing to form a trust or community groups exploring the possibilities of CMLs.

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- provide mutual support and learning
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The current state of local authority leisure and library service provision;

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 gives local authorities a statutory duty “...to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof”. As public sector budgets have been repeatedly cut, many local authorities have been unable to maintain their existing network of libraries and explored other ways of providing the service, using community-managed models.

Community managed models are varied, suiting the needs of the community and their relationship with the local authority and statutory service, but they are characterised by the level of volunteer involvement throughout all aspects of their delivery.

How local authorities use alternative models of service delivery in Wales, and the perceived benefits associated with them;

CMLs are positive about playing a role as a community hub and see this as a natural fit with their community ethos. They provide a diverse range of activities, services, support and outreach which goes above and beyond what local authority library service provision is able to provide:

Activities

- Reading & writing groups
- Arts & cultural events from exhibitions to performances.

- Health and wellbeing: gardening; dementia groups; yoga; mindfulness sessions; weight-loss groups
- Lifelong learning: lectures; local history society meetings; crafts sessions; U3A groups Social: 'knit and natter' groups; Women's Institute groups, quiz nights; games nights

Outreach

- ESOL groups
- Fuel poverty advice
- Foodbanks and community fridges
- Legal signposting
- Providing 'Warm Spaces'
- Projects and programmes delivered through grant funding initiatives.

Retail & Hospitality

- Retail: second-hand book stores; selling artworks by local artists and books by local authors
- Hospitality: Cafes; hot drinks machine; bars

Services

- IT & Digital support and equipment; laptop & device lending, providing data, support for job seekers
- Business support
- Mental health services
- Tuition
- Careers and welfare: work-finding skills; advice on benefits, housing and blue badge applications; Citizens Advice Bureau

There are nearly **20,000** volunteers supporting community libraries in England & Wales to grow and thrive. This not only benefits library service provision, embedding community voices throughout, but provides significant benefits and opportunities to the volunteers.

In 2011, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) did a review of some of the first community-managed libraries. They concluded that 'existing community libraries have achieved something over and above keeping the library open within their areas, offering new activities and social events, engaging their local communities and often exemplifying a beneficial effect on community cohesion' (Woolley 2011). In some cases, they noted that CMLs were also able to improve the service by increasing numbers of users and lengthening opening hours.

Community libraries delivered by charities, CICs, CIOs and parish councils allow for a flexible approach to fundraising, procurement and the development of services to the benefit of their specific community. It is however vital that community libraries are recognised for their efforts and successes and continue to be recognised as part of the provision of public libraries in England & Wales. It is clear that alternative models to delivering library services can provide a cheaper and more effective service, however to ensure that the service is sustainable in the long-term, it requires public investment.

Good practice to ensure sustainability of local leisure and library services for future generations.

Many local authority-run libraries have become community hubs through co-location with other services. These community hubs tend to be characterised by large buildings (either large library buildings in which other services are also offered, or large buildings offering a range of services, of which one is the library) and by a focus on alignment of a range of public services. Community-managed libraries may be in similar physical co-location arrangements but are mostly smaller, yet still able to offer space for groups and clubs, may have cafes or second hand bookstores, and may have relationships with local services to provide drop in 'surgeries' (e.g. the police, local MPs, or planning authorities).

The key indicator of successfully run library services, developing alternative models of delivery, is it's ability to diversify services while meeting the needs and expectations of their community. This can differ greatly from location to location, and demonstrates why change led by community engagement is so important to ensure sustainability.