

A Case Study on the Changing Face of UK Public Libraries

In this case study I will be looking at how the UK public library service has had to change and adapt in order to meet readers' needs and keep with the changing times. There are records of the existence of a library available to the public in the fifteenth century in the UK. Libraries have been a vital source of information and enlightenment to people over the centuries. Over time, the library has offered more than books to the UK population. As technology has advanced and information has become more accessible to people in their own homes, the library has had to look beyond loaning books and audio-visual material. The libraries have made computers available to the public for the internet and for completing work on a booking time basis. The libraries have even made use of their buildings for events and general usage for the public.

However the public library service in the UK has been facing serious problems for the past 18 years. There have been cuts to local government budgets. This has meant local councils, who fund the public library service, have had to make cuts to the public libraries in their areas. This puts a lot of pressure on the council about how to make cuts to the libraries without causing major detriment to both the staff and the general public. Unfortunately, whichever angle the library service is looked at, the cuts are still going to be detrimental. The two options which are normally presented are either to reduce the number of staff or close one of the library branches. For the first option the heads of the library service would have to look at what each branch needs as an essential position. In some cases they look at amalgamating positions, such as having a team librarian for multiple branches instead of one for each branch. In order to decide which branch for the latter option, they have to look which branch is used the least and which one has the least number of issues.

The problem with both of these options is they do not appear to factor in the accessibility for the public, in particular the more senior users who are limited with the distance they can travel. The other group the options do not consider are the youth. They commonly use the libraries as a place to study. Having it within reach of their home is not only a matter of sensibility but also safety. Parents do not encourage their children to travel far away after school. Having the library within a reachable distance ensures they are within safe distance of their home should they need to visit the library after dark.

There are several possible solutions to the lack of funding which could address the loss of funding. The first solution is they could outsource the library service to a not-for-profit organisation. This could then take the pressure off the local authorities to provide the funding. This would ensure that the libraries had the funds to carry on providing an efficient service. It would also mean they could maintain being able to buy the latest books for their readers to enjoy. The second possible solution is to provide a premium membership alongside the standard free membership. This would encourage people to pay towards a membership which in turn would go into the library service. This would provide essential funds for the upkeep and maintenance of the libraries. The third option is to allow volunteers in the community to take over the branch which is being closed. This would allow the branch to stay open for the local residents.

There is an organisation called CILIP. They are the Library and Information Service. They work with libraries and support librarians. They have supported Public Library services across the UK when they have faced cuts. They have campaigned alongside political parties against the cuts. They have actively engaged with local library services to find a solution or if the cuts go through, to ensure there is space for rebuilding;

- “If the consultation has concluded and is either demonstrably flawed or prejudicial, or produces recommendations which in our assessment materially damage the public’s statutory right to a quality library service, we may raise an objection with the council or local stakeholders and decision-makers, including where appropriate the Member of Parliament;
- If we cannot divert the course of the proposed cuts or closures, we may reach out to the council and seek to engage with them on an ongoing basis to encourage them to recover and rebuild services when funds allow.” (CILIP, 2020)

As the extract above states, CILIP support local libraries to find solutions. One of their solutions is to encourage local councils to re-look at the cut later on when they have more sufficient funds. All three solutions have been implemented in local library services in different areas of the UK. The first solution seems one that is more viable. Two of the London Boroughs have outsourced their library service to a company called Greenwich Leisure Limited. Outsourcing council services is not usually seen as a positive solution. However, in the case of Libraries, this would be beneficial. It would take the total onus off of the local council and would then open up the possibility of having more funding towards the running of the library service and towards purchasing stock. This would also save the positions within the library branches.

The way to implement this solution is to initially consult with the library staff across the local authority area. Taking into consideration the feedback received, launch a period of time where organisations can make a bid for the library service. Then, look at the organisations which have made a bid and assess which are meeting the requirements for what is needed and interview them. Accept the bid of the organisation best suited to resolve the issues arisen in the library service. The final stage would be to plan the transition and then consult with the staff within the library service and inform them of the next stages for them and reassure them that this is best solution available.

Bibliography

CILIP. (2020). *Public Libraries - Cilip: The Library and Information Association*. Retrieved September 08, 2021, from Cilip: The Library and Information Association:
<https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/PublicLibraries>