



Historic Local Authority Libraries: updated

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Overview

- Local government restructuring, following the substantial cuts imposed by the Comprehensive Spending Review 2010, has created a series of challenges for local library services and buildings.
- Local authorities are under increasing pressure to either maximise their return on the property they own, or dispose of it to raise income. A number of measures introduced in the last 5 years have sought to incentivise the sale of local authority owned assets
- Falling budgets and changes to service delivery has the potential to threaten the fabric and sustainability of historic library buildings.



Islington Central Library. Image: Susie Barson

Horizon	Horizon 1 (1-3 years)	Local authorities are in the process of implementing cuts and making changes to library provisions.
Importance	Medium	Whilst the potential change of use does not, automatically equate to a threat to historic libraries, their position at the centre of communities often mean any damage has a disproportion affect on the wider area.
Credibility	High	A wide variety of work has been carried out on issues surrounding local libraries.
<i>Response</i>	Recommendation:	a) consideration of issues during NHPP projects 6791 and 6864); and b) the production of guidance of refurbishment of historic libraries
	Dissemination:	External
<i>Links</i>	Associated Horizon Scan(s)	Horizon Scans: none Assessments: 2013-18 Historic Local Authority Libraries
	Other Links: The work of NHPP Activity Team 4A4	
<i>Consultees</i>	NHPP Activity Team 4A4; the Arts Council England	
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1. INTRODUCTION

Local authorities are under increasing pressure to reduce costs and to maximise the effectiveness of their property portfolios. One high profile category of local authority asset is the library. Authorities have a statutory responsibility (under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964) to provide library services, but that responsibility is only to the service, not the buildings in which the services are housed.

2. CONTEXT

It was in 1850, with the passing of the Public Libraries Act, that local libraries as we recognise them now first began to appear. The Act established the principle of the free public library, enabling councils to establish public libraries and museums. It empowered local authorities to add 1/2d per £1 to property rates for the purchase of books, newspapers and maps if two-thirds of ratepayers attending a public meeting for the purpose agreed to it. The 3,400 local libraries that exist in England today can trace their origin back to this Act.

Despite the ability of local authorities to levy a rate, in practice raising sufficient funds to build a library often proved difficult. This meant many authorities relied on the generosity of donations by philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie, John Passmore Edwards and Henry Tate to supplement the funding needed to erect the buildings. For example, by the time of Carnegie's death in 1919 over 380 public library buildings in the UK were associated with his name. The Public Libraries Act 1919 extended the reach of the library service beyond towns to rural areas by allowing counties to become library authorities. By 1926 96.3% of the population of England and Wales were covered by library areas, although actual provision was patchy. After a big push in the late 1930s, there was stagnation of the service during immediate post-war period – apart from a small push in 1954-5 – until 1958, when a lifting of building restrictions encouraged a spurt of new libraries and an increase in spending on books which lay the foundations for the modern library service. This progress was consolidated in 1964 with the passing of the Public Libraries and Museums Act.

Following years of gradual, uneven growth, library-building boomed in the early 1960s and the nation's cities, towns and communities were provided with new libraries that were well used into the early years of the 21st century. According to a report published in 2008 by the public service union, Unison, entitled *Taking Stock: the Future of our Public Library Service*:

'In 2006-7, there were 337 million visits to more than 4,700 public libraries in Britain, 315 million book issues from a total stock of 103 million books, 8.7 million issues of audio, visual or electronic items; 64 million visits to library websites and a budget of over £1billion. More people visit libraries than either football matches or the cinema.'

However, that report also highlighted a number of significant challenges facing local libraries. It pointed to the fact that falling budgets, increasing commercialisation and

privatisation were leading to falling book acquisition, a reduction in footfall and the deterioration of the buildings themselves.’

More recently the large scale cuts in local authority budgets have meant both cuts to library budgets and changes to how and where those services are provided, with additional pressure being placed on councils to strengthen the role communities play in the management of a place. The most recent figures compiled by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) show large reductions in staff numbers, particularly of more expensive professionally qualified librarians who have been replaced by younger, less qualified ‘library assistants’. Opening hours have been reduced and library buildings continue to close.

There are approximately 3,400 libraries operating in England today. There are nearly 300 listed library buildings; it is not known how many of these are still in library use, have a new function, are closed, or are under threat of closure.

3. ISSUES

3.1 The library service

Under section 7 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 it is ‘the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof.’ However, the extent of the service, how it is provided, and where are not prescribed. Since the cuts to local authority budgets caused by the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) there has been a steady increase in the different interpretations of the term ‘library service’.

A variety of approaches and methods are set out in a report published by the Arts Council in January 2013 in *Community Libraries: 10 case studies*. The use of alternative service models shaped to fit particular local circumstances are being heavily advocated by both national government and the Local Government Association. In 2012 Councillor Flick Rea, Chair of the Culture, Tourism and Sport Board of the Local Government Association urged local authorities to explore ‘innovative ways to keep providing quality services such as opening libraries in shops, working with volunteers, basing libraries in community centres which also provide jobs and training, and sharing costs with neighbouring authorities.’

For example, North Yorkshire County Council currently operates ‘outlets’ run by community groups, which work on the basis of a service agreement and are part of the statutory library service with access to professional support. There are also ‘collection points’ provided in a wide range of locations, sometimes public buildings such as schools and leisure centres, sometimes private or commercial buildings such as shops or even pubs. Such a model represents a shift away from the library being a defined, purpose built building, and towards it being the service of book lending.

3.2 The library building

There are many purpose-designed library buildings, including those identified as of historic and architectural interest and designated as such. As with the services

themselves, they are facing uncertain futures. Some are facing closure, some are being transferred into community-based ownership, and some are being re-modelling for new uses.

Refurbishment or conversion for new use may involve the re-configuration of internal spaces and the loss of historic or architectural fixtures and fittings such as period shelving, panelling, fixed desks, light fittings, stained glass, ironwork, murals, decorative tiles, sculpture or reliefs. Historic plan forms comprising dedicated spaces such as the children's library, newspaper room, local archives room, and the position of staircases and door openings, may be altered to make way for computer terminals, 'break out' space with modern, moveable furniture, or areas for refreshment. Alterations are usually necessary for improved disabled access, drainage and plumbing for new toilets and kitchens.

The Council for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) published a report, *Better Public Libraries* in 2003, the aim of which was to promote good practice in design quality – new build, refurbishment and conversion – for public library services. It argued that the 'rundown appearance of libraries and inconvenient locations were a disincentive to the public using them'. The Culture, Media and Sports Committee agreed in 2005 that 'a significant barrier to library use was shabby buildings, whether inside or out', and a DCMS asset survey of a third of all local authorities estimated the maintenance backlog to be £79.8 million. Furthermore in evidence to the Committee the Museums and Libraries Association (MLA - whose responsibilities have now been passed to the Arts Council England) reported on a ten-year old backlog of building repairs and refurbishments totalling £650 million in England alone. The MLA believed this potential cost had increased substantially. The DCMS Committee concluded that 'there was manifestly a problem'.

One solution to funding library repair and refurbishment was the timely introduction, in 2007, of the Big Lottery Fund's Community Library Programme, which has provided grants of between £250,000 and £2million to 58 library authorities in England (BLF, 2007). This funding formed a significant part of the finance used to improve the library estate as well as library services prior to 2010.

Instructive examples of historic library refurbishment were compiled and published in *Renewing our Libraries: Case Studies in Re-planning and Refurbishment* (2009) by librarian Michael Dewe. Dewe observed that library refurbishment is not new. He shows that public library buildings have been substantially refurbished or altered approximately every 20-30 years. Drivers for these changes include: new library methods such as from closed to open access; the closing down of particular departments such as news rooms or museums; a change in service emphasis from reading or studying from books to the use of computer terminals, and the need for more storage space or space for staff. Another factor is the marked improvement in the building of new or refurbished national libraries such as the British Library (1998), which inspired guardians of library buildings as to what could be achieved, and the fact that refurbishment always increases footfall. Dewe notes that between the years 1990-4 there were 165 new academic and public library buildings,

73 refurbishments, 33 extensions and 110 conversions across the academic and public library sector. He questions whether this was part of the usual cycle, or whether there has been a recognition that libraries need to change and adapt, and therefore be ready to convert more frequently. In recent years there has been a significant introduction of more dedicated space to children, disabled children and their parents and carers, self-service issuing and renewal machines, space for storage of digital information, community meeting areas and even cafés. Accommodating these new functions in a new building where they can be designed in from the outset has resulted in some very successful buildings; shoe-horning those in to an historic building with fixed partitions, fixtures and fittings can be a good deal more challenging.

4. POTENTIAL RESPONSES FOR SECTOR

Local authorities are utilising a variety of different approaches to ensure acceptable library services are provided for reduced costs. It has been well established across local services that the cuts are of an order that simply salami slicing budgets is not sufficient. A more fundamental re-evaluation of services is required. The fundamental re-evaluation of services is impacting on historic libraries in a variety of ways.

4.1 Case studies

4.1.1 London Borough of Islington

Islington Council are aware of the public affection and esteem in which buildings of historic and architectural interest are held by the community. They have four listed libraries, and every effort has been made to keep these buildings in library use. However, these older buildings with layouts that no longer fit the current patterns of use are more difficult to adapt, especially with the lifts and ramps needed to improve access for the disabled, and are costly to maintain and run. The concept of a new multi-functional building in a central location, with a modern layout and equipment, is very appealing to library service providers. Current users comprise school groups who use the libraries a lot during the week; families who use the building at weekends and holidays; students studying for exams; the retired and elderly, and the unemployed. These users frequently come to the libraries to use computers rather than to access books, and some of the older buildings are not flexible enough to accommodate the change. The bigger listed buildings, such as the Central Library at Fieldway Crescent (Grade II) can cope, but the medium-to-small buildings are less flexible and less able to accommodate rows of terminals between fixed furniture, shelving bays and bookshelves lining the walls. This is not a recent change; the necessity of adapting space for new technology arose between 2003 and 2004, when the Government introduced the People's Network Programme. This stated that there should be free access to computers for everyone, provided in local libraries.

The authority is now seeking ways in which these spaces can be used to raise additional incomes through renting the space to local groups.

4.1.2 Leek Library, Staffordshire

Included as a case study by Michael Dewe, Leek Library in Staffordshire, is a library, museum and art gallery dating from 1884 and listed grade II*. In 2001 Staffordshire embarked on a programme of renovating its libraries, where need for refurbishment was highlighted by the Best Value review of libraries in 2000 and the results of public consultation and focus group meetings. These showed that the public required better access to libraries, improved marketing, better stock and brighter, lighter environments. They also wanted more comfortable seating areas, quiet areas, local history areas, provision of refreshment; a 'best seller' area, more IT equipment, access to other council services or at least information about these services, and happy and helpful staff.

Staffordshire Council decided that for all the libraries they wanted a 'look': bright colours, light wood tones, common signage, a house style for marketing and publicity. Council officers worked with retail consultants to improve the customer experience: remove clutter, improve presentation, create more space to move around, and staff trained in customer awareness.

They did not want to disturb original features such as ceiling coving, picture rails and panelling, so they introduced a centrally placed modern 'spine'. This contained everything from cabling, bookshelves, display cases, computer workstations, integrated lighting etc, so that there was no need to interfere with the original walls. These were painted in dove grey and other muted tones to provide an elegant backdrop to the library rooms. Some historic light fittings and windows in the building were replaced in facsimile.

Existing users of the library had input too. Even though the interior had been reconfigured to obviate the need to enter the building through the original main entrance, protest against changing the main entrance was listened to, and the existing entrance preserved. In assessing the procedure for the management of the project, early consultation with English Heritage (now Historic England) was identified as a very good idea *'as it was clear that little progress would be made without their input. Grade II* meant a higher level of thought in relation to the buildings, its fixtures and fittings'*¹. In the final evaluation of the refurbishment, it was perceived that the flexibility of space worked well.

Space for exhibitions, small children and school children's spaces were released by condensing the electrical cables into the spine, and some areas of the old library formerly used by staff were now open to the public, whilst the local studies section was preserved. The library was linked physically to council services via a glazed link, and perhaps significantly because of this there was a noticeable increase in the number of users.²

4.2 The future of the local historic library

Undoubtedly the future for local library lies with them being accommodated alongside other services in multi-functional local information hubs. If, from a cash-strapped Council's point of view, an historic listed building can be adapted to these different uses

¹ Michael Dewe *Renewing our Libraries* p.27

² Ibid. p.29

of space, and for access by people in wheelchairs, partially sighted or blind, the likelihood is that they will survive, as with the Islington examples; if not, then the rationale for keeping them open, apart from the benefit of a central location diminishes, and the idea of identifying alternative uses or alternative owners becomes stronger.

4.2.1 Asset transfers

The Arts Council's report *Community Libraries: 10 case studies* (January 2013) investigated the fate of a number of libraries run by various local authorities across the country following the 2010 CSR. That study suggests that asset transfer may be one alternative for those buildings that do not have a future as part of the local authority property portfolio (additionally, libraries could be added to local lists of assets of community value, under the Localism Act, to afford them further protection).

In one case study, Grappenhall Library in Warrington, the library was earmarked for closure by the executive council following a review of library provision in 2010 as part of efforts to find budget savings. The reasons for the closure was based on the relatively low usage, proximity to another library (less than two miles away from another branch); and the likely social impact of closure. After the decision was made to close the library the process of asset transfer began, and expressions of interest were sought from organisations that wished to take over the building. There was no expectation or requirement for expressions of interest to include maintenance or provision of a library service in the building. The council maintained the condition of the building whilst the process of transfer was being undertaken.

The Friends of Grappenhall Library was set up as a registered charity in November 2011, the library transferred in December of that year and was re-launched as a library in February 2012, with the aim of providing '*good quality books and periodicals for loan and reference in a comfortable, welcoming and easily accessible local setting for members of the Grappenhall community*'³. Library hours were slightly reduced. The building was transferred to the community with no rent to pay. The council retains the freehold of the building and if for any reason the library fails the council can take back the building. The council also expected – and indeed encouraged – the building to have other public services co-located as a community and neighbourhood hub, with art gallery space, rehearsal space for a choir, careers service and neighbourhood police service. It has donated equipment, furniture and books.

In the case of Grappenhall library, as with other case studies in the Arts Council report, a number of important lessons were identified:

- That the transfer of former library buildings to communities is not a 'one size fits all' process;
- That the support of the local authority at every stage of the process is key to the success of the transfer of library buildings;

³ *Community Libraries: ten case studies; Grappenhall library, Warrington, Cheshire* p.7

- That ‘those interested in taking over a library need to be aware that there is a difference between running a campaign and running a library; steps need to be taken to manage the transition.’⁴; and
- That community-run libraries benefit hugely from advice provided by professionally qualified library staff.

These conclusions are broadly consistent with Historic England’s own work on asset transfer – the *Pillars of the Community: the transfer of local authority heritage assets* (April 2015). That publication also highlighted the importance of diversifying the usage of the building. The more roles it is able to perform, the less reliant it is on the success of any one. This again raises the prospect of adaption and refurbishment.

Of course, the term ‘asset transfer’ itself covers a variety of different models and types of arrangement, from the full transfer of the freehold of a building, through to the use of peppercorn rents; and a variety of types of partnership agreements.

4.2.2 Refurbishment as a library

With the current drive to alter perceptions of the public library image as dull, dingy, old-fashioned, uninviting and frankly irrelevant to modern life, the historic public library is facing major challenges, especially those where there has been little investment in recent years. One major lesson that Michael Dewe emphasises is that the successful refurbishment of an old building is helped if there is support from various sources: users, staff, elected members or trustees. The task is also made easier where opportunities for partnership exist that enable sufficient funding to be acquired or the possibility of a sharing buildings with other local authority or institutional services, a school for example. A more recent and radical solution has been the merging of library building resourcing on two or more super authorities. An example is the proposed £2m upgrade of Hammersmith library, a 1905 grade II listed building in Shepherd’s Bush which will undergo refurbishment, with more books, new furniture, shelving and self-issue terminals, and house the borough’s archives there from 2016. Hammersmith is part of the tri-borough service sharing initiative with Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea. The council claim that the cost savings made by sharing back office systems has helped secure the future of 21 libraries across the three boroughs.⁵

4.3 Historic libraries and Historic England

Historic England is undertaking further research with the potential for influencing the future of historic local library buildings. Firstly, work has been completed looking at the quality of local authority Asset Management Plans and the level of work required to ensure they reflect the management required for heritage assets owned or managed by the local authority. The outcomes of the report will feed into the updating of the Historic England’s *Managing Local Authority Heritage Assets*.

⁴ Ibid p.18

⁵ www.fulhamchronicle.co.uk, article by Adam Courtney 4 April 2013

Additionally, Historic England is actively engaging with the issue of the threat to historic public libraries. The Assessment Team are working with colleagues in Listing to produce a list of examples of historic and architecturally significant purpose-built libraries from the Victorian period to the 1980s, that may merit national designation. An Introduction to Heritage Assets (IHA) on public libraries 1850 to 1939, and another covering the period 1945 -1990, have been produced (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/ihas-buildings/>).