

# common**FUTURES**

community ownership explorers, civic engineers and unconsultants

## SUBMISSION

**Prepared for:**

**The Sieghart Commission**

## **About Common Futures**

Common Futures is a modest new venture working with the public, private and third sectors to explore and kick at the boundaries of the community ownership landscape...

The History of Community Asset Ownership is well-rehearsed and, increasingly, the ownership and management of land and buildings for mutual benefit is a feature of communities the length and breadth of the UK. There is no shortage of ambition - with communities engaged and hard at work in socially conscious attempts to take control of an altogether bewildering range of tangible assets. And, there is also a healthy contemporary interest in both mutual ownership and social investment.

But, technological advancements are transforming the operating context at break-neck pace. Increasingly, most people expect 24/7 service delivered online via mobile devices. The UK Government is wedded to implementing a digital-by-default approach to public service delivery, and is investing significant public funds in open and big data alongside cutting-edge technological innovation. The digital disruption that undermined the music and movie industries a decade ago, is fast impacting our perception of the value offered by our public libraries. Our high streets are endeavouring to withstand the combined pressures of economic austerity and a burgeoning internet economy. Meanwhile, the Creative Industries are flourishing, and a local manufacturing revolution borne of the hacker and maker movements is increasingly discernible.

There are, potentially, very serious ramifications for deprived communities – whether we're talking about accessibility, affordability or confidence, knowledge and skills. Equally, there are concerns about the preparedness of the public and third sectors for the revolution that is already well underway. But, there are also significant opportunities and scope for all concerned to identify with the principles of openness and mutuality that underpin so much that is good about our 'brave new world'.

So, we thought, it's high time someone set about exploring what value might flow from the ownership and management of digital assets and enterprises developed by and for communities. And, that's where we're making a start...

## **Our Libraries Work**

The team has worked extensively in the library sector over the past few years:

- **Community Libraries: Learning from Experience** – directing Locality's contribution to primary research into community involvement in library asset management and service delivery, working with Arts Council England, DCMS, DCLG, DEFRA and the LGA: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-libraries/community-libraries-research/>
- **Enterprising Libraries: St Botolph's Waiting Room** – narrating a Carnegie UK Trust sponsored pilot to establish a library/hack/maker space with Essex Libraries: <http://commonfutures.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/On-the-Origins-of-St-Botolphs.pdf> & <http://www.st-botolphs.org/>
- **Enabling Enterprise in Libraries** - directing Locality's contribution to a research project funded by Arts Council England to explore existing good practice as well as the future potential for income generation within a library context: <http://locality.org.uk/news/enabling-enterprise-libraries/>
- **Common Libraries** – 'prototyping the library of the future - today' by establishing a library-hack-maker space network, working with 4th Floor Chattanooga, for Arts Council England: <http://www.commonlibraries.cc/>

- **Enterprising Libraries** - working for Arts Council England, DCLG and the British Library to assist council officers in Devon exploring the potential to establish a library-hack-maker space in a rural setting, underpinned by creative commons licensing principles and the provision of open source business advice and support, integral to its #FabHubDevon initiative.
- **Our Digital Community** – working on behalf of DCLG to explore the potential for communities to develop digital assets and enterprises, attract relevant investment and deliver social impact in keeping with the Government’s opening public services and digital by default commitments: <http://www.ourdigitalcommunity.org/>
- **The Future High Street: Perspectives on Living, Learning and Livelihoods in our Communities** – providing expert input to the Future Spaces Foundation: <http://www.futurespacesfoundation.org/our-work.html>

### **Summary Response**

In our view, libraries (once, very tangible bastions of information access) are increasingly akin to fast disappearing islands faced with digital climate change and, as such, we need to ask whether and how that situation might in fact be harnessed to positive effect.

Simply stated, with the democratisation of the means of production and reproduction, as well as the exponential growth in information as “data”, we are minded to think that we must explore what role libraries might meaningfully play in the 21st century where *harnessing* information for social and economic benefit is concerned.

In summary, then, we believe the core principles and organisation of a public library service in future should be:

- **Third Spaces** – locally rooted social capital factories, accessible to and welcoming of all, that bridge the online/offline divide and encourage literacy as well as STEAM skills development to nurture contemporary creative endeavor.
- **Read/Write Oriented** – facilitating the *consumption, production and re-mixing* of information, knowledge and know-how (including, data).
- **A National Library Service underpinned by an Open, Enabling ICT Infrastructure** – to facilitate access to information, knowledge and know-how on an anytime/anywhere basis.
- **Enterprising Local-by-Default Library Services responsive to User Needs and Interests** - to nurture digital inclusion as well as *access to/production* and re-mixing of information, knowledge and know-how in a trusted and supportive environment.
- **A Locus for Citizen Interaction with Contemporary Culture, Public Services, Community Activities, Open Government and E-Democracy.**

## 1. What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?

Public library services in the UK continue to evolve, as in other developed countries, to respond to social trends and, in particular, the emergence of new digital technologies. This is against a backdrop of falling footfall and book borrowing where literacy rates compare favourably with developing countries<sup>1</sup>, but also reflects growing interest in e-lending courtesy of digital disruption<sup>2</sup>, as well as other opportunities to **enhance the contemporary library offer through innovation in our increasingly read/write world**<sup>3</sup>.

The Future Libraries Programme saw greater collaboration between local authorities in the design and delivery of services, more imaginative use of digital technology and a new relationship with citizens/consumers through collaborative consumption (e.g. BookShare), self-service counters and community access points in new locations. The Library Development Initiative tested new approaches to library service delivery linked to health, employment and cultural outcomes as well as in respect of digital innovation. And, in partnership with Arts Council England and the Reading Agency, SCL has developed four universal offers for libraries – including, a core ‘digital offer’.

However, these changes are taking place within an unprecedented financial context which is forcing local government to rationalise its capital assets and reduce revenue costs. Indeed, the LGA’s Funding Outlook for Councils from 2010/11 to 2019/20 (June 2012) indicated that, on current trajectories, reductions in local government budgets could see spend on cultural services reduced by as much as 90% by 2020. Since 2010, then, there has been significant and urgent pressure on local government to reshape library services as austerity measures have impacted the public sector. Financial logic is pushing more towards the co-location of services, significant reductions in mobile libraries and the demise of stand-alone library buildings - as well as their transfer, in some cases, to community and voluntary groups and parish and town council.

All of this poses significant obstacles to library leaders who are required now **to respond to our increasingly information, knowledge and data-driven society**.

Library service evolution and innovation, then, is not without its challenges. Moreover, recent research underlines that library leaders may lack some of the skills and competencies required, and all too often encounter obstacles within Local Authorities to making much needed changes - in particular, insofar as they lack the **open, enabling ICT infrastructure** that is required to innovate, share and jointly adopt digital services more efficiently<sup>4</sup>. A tangible digital divide also persists such that a significant number of library users continue to lack the confidence, skills or desire to make effective use of any technology-based services that library leaders might move to implement – such that **the role of libraries in nurturing digital inclusion is considered paramount at this time**.

Nonetheless, in its response to Envisioning the Library of the Future, Arts Council England called upon library service commissioners to ‘make the most of digital technology and creative media’, whilst also recognising the need to ‘deliver the right skills for those who work in libraries’ – an acknowledgement, perhaps, that efforts to facilitate a ‘step-change’ in proceedings may now be required. Moreover, our work points to numerous overseas examples in support of a ‘digital trajectory’ for library service enhancement where their overall resilience and sustainability (better, ‘contemporary relevance’) is concerned. In

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<sup>1</sup> Taking Part 2013/14 Q1 Statistical Release: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/taking-part-201314-quarter-1-statistical-release>

<sup>2</sup> The Sieghart Review & E-lending Pilots: <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/library-e-lending-pilot-loans-new-releases.html>

<sup>3</sup> For further information about technology driven innovation in libraries, see: <http://commonlibraries.cc/resources/>

<sup>4</sup> Arts Council England’s Response to Envisioning the Library of the Future: [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/The\\_library\\_of\\_the\\_future\\_May\\_2013.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/The_library_of_the_future_May_2013.pdf) P7

particular, Eli Neiburger's contributions at VALA 2012 and LIANZA 2013 are considered noteworthy<sup>5</sup>, and a recent article in the New York Times verifies the impact that digital developments and innovation can generate in respect of library visitor numbers<sup>6</sup>.

However, we would also wish to highlight the following initiatives from the United States which **underline the potential for libraries to serve as third spaces that facilitate the production and re-mixing of information, knowledge and know-how**:

- **The Library as Community Publishing Platform** – points to the potential for libraries of the future to enable community publishing through digital technology<sup>7</sup>, and functioning examples of note overseas include the Province Town Press<sup>8</sup> and activities underway in the Williamson County Library<sup>9</sup>.
- **4th Floor Chatt, Chattanooga** – points to the potential for libraries to be either co-located or integrated with hacker and maker spaces<sup>10</sup>, and is informing prototyping underway in the UK in 5 locations supported by Arts Council England in the form of the Common Libraries initiative<sup>11</sup>. The subject was also explored in a recent BBC Radio 4 broadcast<sup>12</sup>.
- **Gigabit Libraries Network** - a global relationship network and open collaboration of gig-ready and "gig-aspiring" libraries cooperating as a distributed test-bed and showcase environment for high performance applications and equipment in the service of educational, civic and cultural objectives<sup>13</sup>, which would fit with the UK Government investment in recently announced TV White Space pilots<sup>14</sup>.
- **Mozilla: Hive Learning Network, NYC** - a learning lab that engages youth around innovation, digital media and web-making. As part of a larger network of 38 organisations offering out-of-school programs for youth, it provides a test-bed for Mozilla projects, gives network members access to innovative digital literacy and web-maker programming, and allows youth to act as co-designers and builders in new Mozilla learning initiatives<sup>15</sup>.

We are inclined to agree, then, that a prerequisite of any library service of the future is liable to be underpinned by digital developments at both the national and local levels - by virtue of the technological disruption that is already being wrought in relation to more traditional library services, and because libraries must evolve if they are to remain relevant in our increasingly read/write world. However, to the extent that Government policy is supportive and considerable energy is being invested in, for example, e-lending pilots amongst library

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· To access the video footage, visit:

<http://webcast.gigtv.com.au/Mediasite/Play/1e065b11e6924a0a908cebb76d7917c71d> &  
<http://www.librarycamp.co.uk/2014/01/eli-neiburger-delta-ahead-diversifying.html>

· Library Usage Soars as Libraries get Madly Innovative: <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/policysocial-context/23815-library-usage-soars-as-libraries-get-madly-innovative.html>

· Huffington Post, The Library as Community Publishing Platform:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-coker/library-ebooks\\_b\\_2951953.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-coker/library-ebooks_b_2951953.html)

· For further information, visit: <http://provincetownpublicpress.org/>

· For further information, visit: <http://www.librarytechnology.org/ltg-displaytext.pl?RC=18836>

· For further information, visit: <http://chattlibrary.org/4th-floor> &

<http://www.theatlanticcities.com/design/2014/01/library-future-here/8193/> &

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/next-economy/solutions-bank/what-the-library-of-the-future-will-look-like-20140121>

· For further information, visit: <http://www.commonlibraries.cc/>

· BBC Radio 4, The Life Scientific: Why Public Workshops should Replace Libraries:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03xdmz8>

· For further information, visit: <http://giglibraries.net/>

· The Telegraph, BT, Microsoft and Google to take part in UK 'white space' pilot, [October, 2013] -

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/10350792/BT-Microsoft-and-Google-to-take-part-in-UK-white-space-trial.html>

<sup>15</sup> For further information, visit: <http://hivenyc.org/>

service providers at present, it is not yet clear whether new/emergent ICT services are expected to be provided 'free at the point of use', in keeping with the established library ethos. Looking ahead, this could well impact their potential to generate the investment required to deliver a step-change where local services are concerned, unless that is to be financed in some other way. Neither is it clear where volunteer-led/donations-based libraries – as distinct from trading social enterprise libraries - might 'fit' within a digitally enhanced library operating environment at the local level, calling into question whether a digital trajectory might also result, altogether unhelpfully, in a two-tier library service for many communities without intervention. As such, we are minded to recommend that the range of library service providers are supported to become more enterprising in their own right. Alternatively, step-change funding and investment needs to be secured on their behalf at a national level to facilitate pursuit of the digital trajectory outlined above<sup>16</sup>.

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The 'digital landscape' itself remains a relatively new, untried and untested – not to mention, broad-ranging and fast-evolving – phenomenon. Therefore, whilst it is liable to impact the functioning of the public and private sectors as well as civil society in almost every regard over the years to come, and there is the scope and indeed a requirement that library services engage with it in myriad ways, the extent and manner in which library leaders do so in the short, medium and longer term is liable to prove critical, along with their appetite for risk versus 'future proofing'.

The UK Government's Digital Strategy follows the 2012 Budget commitment to digital services being the default, and is supported by a cross-government approach to assisted digital provision. In addition, Government is investing significant funds in the roll-out of next generation broadband, as well as exploring the growth potential of big and open data, the Internet of Things, cutting-edge technologies and Smart Cities (amongst many other potentially relevant initiatives where libraries are concerned). It is also pursuing its Chief Technology Officer's 'better for less' strategy in relation to public sector IT procurement, in tandem with the introduction of a Government IT Profession Competency and Skills Framework.

DCLG has published 'Local Digital Today' and is sponsoring the Local Digital Campaign where local authorities are concerned. Together, they echo much of the drive for change in central government, but also underline significant and persistent concerns surrounding the potential for technology to afford citizens equal access to services (whether as a consequence of accessibility, affordability, relevant skills or, indeed, the general appeal of digital technologies and media where some socio-economic groups are concerned) as well as the scope for digital channels to genuinely enhance citizen engagement. Hence, **the potential for libraries to reap efficiency savings, undertake joint digital service commissioning, facilitate assisted digital interventions and improve marketing and communications are all considered important here.**

Beyond the public sector, there are significant digital developments underway linked to the activities of universities where access to research<sup>17</sup> and online learning opportunities<sup>18</sup> are concerned which could benefit public libraries. A number of initiatives are also seeking to

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<sup>16</sup> For example, there may be scope here to explore Impact Investment with NESTA, the ODI where provision of access to and support to manipulate open data is concerned or, even, the Technology Strategy Board about rendering STEM careers attractive to young people: [https://www.innovateuk.org/competition-display-page/-/asset\\_publisher/RqEt2AKmEBhi/content/making-science-education-and-careers-attractive-for-young-people?p\\_p\\_auth=K42vYQSh](https://www.innovateuk.org/competition-display-page/-/asset_publisher/RqEt2AKmEBhi/content/making-science-education-and-careers-attractive-for-young-people?p_p_auth=K42vYQSh)

<sup>17</sup> For example, through Access to Research: <http://accessstoresearch.pls.org.uk/>

<sup>18</sup> For example, through Local Government Library Technology: <http://lglibtech.wikispaces.com/MOOCs+and+Libraries>

digitise library content at home and overseas<sup>19</sup>. Cutting-edge digital developments being pursued by the private sector are, by contrast, the subject of many and varied contributions to contemporary thinking on the part of futurologists<sup>20</sup>, showcased at significant international events such as SXSW<sup>21</sup>, as well as featuring in industry standard press. However, of particular relevance to library leaders are those developments being spear-headed by the publishing industry as well as leisure and entertainment retailers – especially where they are driving e-book lending/purchasing<sup>22</sup> and the forthcoming deployment of ‘beacon’ technology in our increasingly mobile society<sup>23</sup>.

Many of the challenges faced by library leaders in respect of engaging with the digital landscape are akin to those being faced right across the public sector at present. However, in marked contrast to their central and local government counterparts, as commissioners of increasingly web-based public services, any review of requirements vis-à-vis ‘core principles for a public library service into the future’ must also emphasise:

- the importance attaching to **digital inclusion and assisted digital** interventions in view of the current library user demographic;
- the requirement to better engage with ‘digital natives’ and upwardly mobile adult technophiles to appeal to new audiences on an entrepreneurial and innovative footing and maintain the broadest possible justification for libraries as **a core cultural institution**;
- the challenges and opportunities implied by the need to develop **‘third spaces’**, capable of facilitating **STEAM skills** development at the very heart of communities;
- the provision of open access to information in the broadest possible terms (so, including public **open data** as well as publicly funded research) in tandem with support to make use of the same;
- the zeitgeist in respect of **open government and e-democracy**, such that libraries retain their impartial and trusted space status in the eyes of the general public where the interface between citizen and state is concerned; and
- the challenges and opportunities implied by **significant commercial disruption/competition** for library users time and attention.

## 2. Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?

Compliance with the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) is a matter for Local Authorities and the Secretary of State, whereas the Act’s fitness for purpose where providing 21<sup>st</sup> century library services is concerned likely warrants further discussion.

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• For example, in Norway - <http://www.theverge.com/2013/12/11/5199472/norway-is-digitizing-all-its-books-and-making-them-free-to-read-online> - and in respect of EU wide and international efforts such as Europeana - <http://www.europeana.eu/> - and the DPLA: <http://dp.la/>

• For example, NESTA’s 14 Predictions for 2014: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/news/14-predictions-2014>

• For example, [http://everylibrary.org/sxsw\\_showcasing\\_librarians\\_sxsw/](http://everylibrary.org/sxsw_showcasing_librarians_sxsw/)

• For further information about contemporary pilots, see: <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/library-e-lending-pilot-loans-new-releases.html>

• For further information, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IBeacon>

## Comprehensive?

Our involvement in relevant work, to date, points towards:

- the comparable vulnerability of smaller and/or rural libraries;
- competing funding priorities in areas of significant deprivation and/or rural areas faced with a rapidly ageing demographic set against a backdrop of fiscal austerity;
- the difficulties facing library leaders seeking to make a case for capital investment in inadequate library assets;
- the challenges of accessing library services in less densely populated areas due to public transport limitations;
- limited access to broadband (confidence, skills and services) amongst deprived and/or rural communities where accessing library services online is concerned; and
- the comparative challenge of establishing community libraries in urban and/or deprived settings.

## Efficient?

The library service is comprised of layers/elements – some of which, we feel, require national development and oversight (e.g. the PLR regime, inter-library loans and, increasingly, an open and flexible ICT infrastructure to facilitate issue of national library membership and e-book negotiations and/or lending); some of which might benefit from cross-boundary commissioning and management (e.g. joint back office services, any future charged-for book delivery service); and others which are best suited to local management if they are to become genuinely outward-looking and user-responsive in future (e.g. asset management, assisted digital interventions, community publishing, integration with hacker/maker spaces).

In particular, we are minded to recommend:

- **A National Library Service underpinned by an Open, Enabling ICT Infrastructure** – to facilitate access to information, knowledge and know-how on an anytime/anywhere basis.
- **Enterprising Local-by-Default Library Services responsive to User Needs and Interests** - to nurture digital inclusion as well as *access to/production and re-mixing* of information, knowledge and know-how in a trusted and supportive environment.

### **3. What is the role of community libraries in the delivery of a library offer?**

Our involvement in relevant work, to date, points to:

- A significant number of statutory libraries now being managed by communities, and an expectation that ‘community libraries’ will continue to be established over the course of the next 5 years – although, many are located in rural areas and represent relatively modest numbers of library visits / books borrowed nationally at present.
- Different ‘types’ of community libraries being established – although, to date, there has been relatively little recognition/championing of social and community enterprise models by key stakeholders, save where Cabinet Office support for a mutual spin-out in York is concerned.
- Circa 50% of community libraries having been founded on a volunteer-led/donations basis, rather than as trading social or community enterprises underpinned by funded contracts with library authorities or significant income generation plans, calling into question their overall viability and future resilience.



- Most community libraries being underpinned by some form of ongoing partnership arrangement with their local authority and, more recently, indications that important lessons have been learned in relation to library management system integration and user data handling; and
- The need for an alternative approach in low income communities – where the evidence suggests those communities are likely to find it harder to play a pro-active and sustainable role in managing their local libraries. So, the support that some local authorities have put in place to facilitate the transition to a mix of approaches, including community libraries, has proved immensely beneficial. But, there may be a case for more intensive start-up and on-going support in low-income communities, or the greater involvement of existing community trusts, if community libraries are to become established and sustained throughout the country.

Ultimately, the role of community libraries is a matter for Library Authorities and local communities to determine in dialogue with one another at this time.

However, we would wish to emphasise that recent interpretation of the Act's requirement to assess local needs and consult communities, whilst fitting in a strict sense, frequently serves to exacerbate a "deficit model" in advance of community libraries being established. This has led to confrontation, campaigning, ill-feeling and, ultimately, a 'needs must' attitude amongst those who have stepped-up to the plate to 'save libraries' (too often, where their transfer or closure has been proposed as a *fait accompli*). The approach, then, has failed to solicit the form of response that we believe Government is keen to encourage through both its Open Policy Making and Opening Public Services agendas. And, looking ahead, we would not anticipate it encouraging communities to 'evolve libraries', as is called for in light of the digital trajectory outlined above, since the emphasis is liable to remain firmly upon 'preservation of the status quo' in many instances.

Were we talking about any other service where we wanted to engage, enthuse and/or involve a broad spectrum of people from communities in the co-production of contemporary public services, we might well refer to it as a 'challenge' (as per NESTA in respect of its Rethinking Parks programme), and we'd certainly expect to incentivise any related process such that people would come forward with fresh ideas and energy. Alternatively, we might call for positive contributions via appropriate web platforms (for example - <http://www.openideo.com/challenge>), and we would anticipate the need to provide some form of enterprise development support and/or access to tailored risk and investment capital.

The Common Libraries project, sponsored by Arts Council England, is working with a small number of enterprising community libraries over a period of three months to demonstrate what more/different can be achieved when social and community enterprises are incentivised to learn/think/do different in relation to library service development and delivery. And, we are minded to think that a two-tier library service could well emerge in respect of community libraries, unless more is done to support their digital trajectory in future alongside other providers.