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The Big Society and English public libraries: where are we now?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the impact of the Big Society on public libraries in England. It evaluates the conceptualisation of public libraries as agents in the Big Society agenda and explores the practical implications of this positioning.

Design/methodology/approach – The author critically evaluates evidence from a range of literature, documentation and other sources on the topics of the Big Society, localism and public libraries, the majority of which is of English or UK origin, including that from academic journals, books, grey literature and web sites including blogs and discussion lists. Recent and current developments are reviewed and commented on from the author's viewpoint.

Findings – The paper advances the view that although public libraries encapsulate many Big Society values, including community empowerment and social action, many local councils are seizing on Big Society rhetoric as an expedient method for driving through cutbacks and closures, rather than as a way of making a true shift of power from governors to the governed.

Originality/value – The paper critically evaluates discourses surrounding public libraries and the Big Society with the aim of raising awareness of the local authority policy context and stimulating discussion of the future of public libraries in England.

Keywords Volunteers, Public libraries, Big society, Community engagement, Community empowerment, Community managed libraries, Localism, England

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

There can be little doubt that public libraries in England are currently living in extremely “interesting times”. Faced with severe budgetary constraints, cuts to opening hours, staffing, bookfunds and increases in fines, fees and charges have become common across the English public library sector[1]. The UK Coalition Government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) of 2010 imposed unprecedented cuts on local authorities of 27 per cent over the following four years (HM Treasury, 2010) and, in response, local councils have had to reduce spending and find savings across the board. All public services in England are feeling the pinch of government cutbacks. At the time of writing (May 2013), the UK economy has just about avoided a triple-dip recession but times are most definitely hard for local government throughout the country (BBC News Online, 2013). It seems likely that austerity is going to be the norm in the public sector for years to come, leading to cuts in local government services and also encouraging local councils to think about new ways of working and delivering services including the greater involvement of the local community and private and



third sector organisations in the delivery of public services, in line with notions of the Big Society.

As noted above, public libraries have not been spared the axe. Despite only constituting around 1-2 per cent of local authority spending (Macdonald, 2012) few, if any, items of library expenditure have escaped the cuts although public and professional concern has tended to focus on library closures. Alongside closures, an increase in the establishment of “community managed libraries” has also attracted attention. Here, individual libraries have been transferred out of direct local authority control, their management assumed by local community groups of volunteers. On the one hand, the development of community managed libraries fits well within the Big Society philosophy of giving local people more power and encouraging them to take an active role in their communities. On the other hand, the long term viability and effectiveness of some community managed libraries is questionable and the whole concept of community managed libraries seems to suggest a fundamental shift in the nature of the governance of public library services in England, raising some important issues related to the *1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act* (HMSO, 1964) under which public libraries in England and Wales are a statutory local authority service. This paper will analyse the impact of the Big Society programme on public libraries in England and will also evaluate how local public library services support the Big Society agenda. It provides an overview of how public library activities and services in England contribute to the Big Society including an exploration of the concept of community managed libraries in this context, analysing their contribution as a way of devolving power to local people and evaluating their success to date.

The Big Society

First, the term and concept “Big Society” will be explained and clarified. In the run up to the General Election in 2010, the British electorate heard much about the Big Society from the leader of the Conservative Party (and now Prime Minister) David Cameron. This was his “big idea”, his flagship policy. Defined to contrast sharply with big government and the overbearing state, the Conservative Party’s political manifesto for the 2010 General Election with its invitation to “join the government of Britain”, described the Big Society as:

[...] a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control (The Conservative Manifesto, 2010, p. 37).

The stated general aim was to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, taking power away from politicians and giving it to the people. Within this overarching purpose, three key priorities emerged (Stott, 2011):

- (1) Public service reform to open up public services, giving charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups a leading role in their delivery.
- (2) Community empowerment with an emphasis on decentralisation, localism and the devolution of power to local people.
- (3) Social action with mass engagement and philanthropy encouraging people to take an active role in their communities through volunteering and community participation.

Supporters claim that the big society offers benefits to local service provision by being more responsive to public needs and by being more customer-focused which should drive up quality and performance. Following the publication of the Conservative party manifesto in April 2010, *The Times* newspaper called the Big Society, “an impressive attempt to reframe the role of government and unleash entrepreneurial spirit” (*The Times*, 2010, p. 2) while Glasman (2010, p. 59) suggested that the Big Society “addresses important issues relating to the redistribution of power and democracy – a necessary part of a renewed progressive politics – and provides a basis for public sector reform”. The premise is that a reduction or change in the responsibilities of the state provides local people with the opportunity to seize the initiative and exercise more democratic control over the services which impact on their lives, and there are indications that people would welcome the chance to influence local policies. *The Big Society Audit* of 2012, for example, found that “there is an appetite among the public to get involved in local decisions . . . and a belief that it can make a difference” (Civil Exchange, 2012, p. 30). The New Economics Foundation (2010, p. 15) summarised the strengths of the ideas at the heart of the Big Society as:

- Encouraging citizens’ involvement and action that builds on a “rich and cherished tradition” of community engagement, mutualism and self-help dating back to the industrial revolution.
- Recognising that everyone has personal assets and resources that they can contribute to society.
- Building and strengthening social networks which bring lasting physical and mental benefits for all involved.
- Using local knowledge to get better results so that local planning and decision making can respond to diverse local issues.
- Offering ways of transforming the welfare state which has become unsustainable, has done little to prevent needs arising and “has arguably generated a culture of dependency”.

The Big Society has thus been presented as the means to mend “Broken Britain” by redistributing power and control from the state to the people and rebuilding responsibility to develop stronger communities and ultimately a stronger society. Critics of the programme, on the other hand, have raised concerns that the Big Society is little more than an attempt on the part of the Government to reduce public spending within a discourse of social action, civic renewal and democratic devolution. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, described the approach as “aspirational waffle designed to conceal a deeply damaging withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities to the most vulnerable” (Helm and Coman, 2010) while others have argued that the Government has cynically appropriated local activities which were already underway and rebranded them as Big Society initiatives (Hetherington, 2013). It has also been suggested that not all individuals or communities have equal capacity to participate in and benefit from the Big Society (New Economics Foundation, 2010). *The Big Society Audit* of 2012 (Civil Exchange, 2012), for example, suggested that empowering communities was more challenging in socially disadvantaged areas and urban areas, leading some to question whether Cameron’s Big Society is “reserved for the rich” (Salman, 2011). Similarly, concerns have been raised that devolution and

localism favour older people and that local forums which were given enhanced powers under *The Localism Act* of 2011 (HMSO, 2011) are “predominantly comprised of a narrow elite which is far older, more masculine and wealthier than the people it is supposed to represent” (Intergenerational Foundation, 2012, p. 24). *The Big Society Audit* (Civil Exchange, 2012) concluded that there was a “Big Society gap” which benefits older people, advantaged communities, rural areas and the white majority.

One of the other pillars of the Big Society programme, reforming public services by giving charities a larger role in their provision, has also floundered. Although most charities cautiously welcomed the opportunity to be more closely involved in local service delivery, their capacity has been curtailed by the slow pace of reform and funding reductions; 50 per cent of local authorities reported disproportionate cuts to grant funding for the voluntary and community sector in 2012 (Compact Voice, 2012). The problems faced by the voluntary sector led Sir Stephen Bubb (Chief Executive of Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations and once a strong advocate of the programme) to pronounce the Big Society “effectively dead” in an open letter to David Cameron in January 2013 (Bubb, 2013). As charities struggle to engage or withdraw from public service provision, the gap is being increasingly filled by the private sector. Rather than opening up service provision as promised, the drive to secure the best value for public service contracts has led to “mega contracts” which only the private sector can fulfill (Milbourne and Cushman, 2012). This “implicit bias” (Civil Exchange, 2012, p. 4) in government tendering practices has meant that local voluntary and community groups have found it difficult to participate in the Big Society as originally conceived.

The prospect for social action and engagement, key to the Big Society is also considered poor, given the current economic climate. Scott (2010, p. 132), for example, questions whether it is possible to cut services and grow social action simultaneously and suggests that, “the prognosis for revived social action amid austerity cannot be good since empirically people volunteer less at times of recession”. In addition, the general British public appears to be either cynical and/or ignorant about the whole concept of the Big Society. One poll in 2011, for example, found that 78 per cent of adults felt that the Government had failed to convey a clear idea about what the Big Society is all about (Commission on Big Society, 2011).

The future of the Big Society is uncertain, therefore, and although initiatives such as *Big Society Capital*, established to develop a social investment infrastructure in the UK, have had their successes, references to the Big Society by the Government have declined noticeably in recent times, suggesting that the programme has not delivered as was envisaged. Nevertheless, the vocabulary and some of the concepts emphasised by champions of the Big Society are still employed, even though the phrase itself may have lost some of its luster and currency.

The Big Society and public libraries

So what has the Big Society meant for public libraries in England? Developments in this sector have encompassed all three of the key pillars of the Big Society noted above: public service reform; community empowerment; and social action. The following discussion analyses activities and initiatives in public libraries in all three, with most attention focused on the third, social action, as this area has attracted considerable professional, media and public interest.

Public service reform

One of the key tenets of the Big Society is an increased role for community based organisations, including cooperatives, mutuals, community or development trusts and social enterprises, in the running of public services (Brady, 2011). A social enterprise can be defined as:

[...] a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners (DTI, 2002, p. 7).

The establishment of a trust involves the establishment of a not-for-profit company at arm's length and independent of the council, to manage certain aspects of the local authority's services, often its leisure facilities. Aside from the financial aspects, community controlled assets are believed to bring additional benefits to their locality. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation publication suggested that they also bring a sense of community identity and pride; the potential for increased social cohesion; increased confidence, skills and aspirations locally; improved access to services and activities; jobs, training and business opportunities; and physical improvements to the area (Aiken *et al.*, 2011).

In the public library sector in England there are a number of examples of not-for-profit organisations running public libraries, some of quite long-standing. Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust (WLCT) is a registered charity formed in 2003, for example, and is a charitable trust and social enterprise providing leisure and public library services on behalf of Wigan Council. It receives an annual grant from Wigan Council to manage and support services and also raises funds from external funding and income generating activities (Social Enterprise London, 2011). Local council transfer the management of public library services to charities and social enterprises primarily as a way of reducing outgoings as trusts do not pay a range of rates and taxes. Trusts are also said to be eligible to apply for more grants/funding than councils although this has been questioned by the Audit Commission (2006) who concluded that leisure trusts, for example, had not been able to leverage significant external funding sources.

The whole premise of public libraries being run as part of a business (albeit a not-for-profit enterprise) has been called into question, however, because libraries are never going to run at a surplus which is perhaps why local councils have been so keen to divest themselves of them (Smedley, 2013). Cross-subsidy from the other more profitable areas of the trusts' undertakings along with diversification into activities such as coffee shops, training and retail are essential to keep the libraries self-sufficient. Concern about "mission drift", as trusts are distracted from the core purpose of the service in order to chase money and targets (Milbourne and Cushman, 2012), is accompanied by fears that social enterprises will be out-gunned by private companies. As noted above, the *Big Society Audit 2012* (Civil Exchange, 2012, p. 46) identified the accessibility of commissioning and procurement processes to the voluntary and charitable sector as the "Achilles heel" of the Government's drive to open up public service delivery and there are concerns that these difficulties may lead the social enterprise library model to be jettisoned in favour of the private sector (Smedley, 2013). The House of Commons Public Administration Committee (2011) warned that while large private sector companies may offer the cheapest option for

hard-pressed local authorities looking to outsource services, awarding contracts to these alone will pave the way for private sector domination of public sector markets driving out smaller, more innovative, more local and more accountable providers and leading to “creeping privatisation” (Rainford and Tinkler, 2011). The Committee cautioned that:

The objective of the Big Society project of empowering communities will not be achieved by simply contracting with private companies and large national charities (House of Commons Public Administration Committee, 2011, para. 114).

Those attached to the public library ideal can probably just about accept the running of libraries by social enterprises and charitable trusts, especially if the libraries will be saved from closure, but the outsourcing of public libraries to a private company to be run at a profit for that company is harder to swallow. Currently only one public library service in the UK is run by a private company – Hounslow public libraries – but commentators expect that more libraries will be considered for privatisation given the current ideological and economic environment (www.publiclibrariesnews.com/campaigning/privatized-libraries-outsourcing-library-services/overview, accessed 16 May 2013). Critics fear that private companies will only be able to make a profit by cutting back on existing services including the quantity and quality of staff. American firm LSSI has expressed an interest in bidding to run library services in the UK (Grice and Dutta, 2011) but Anstice (2011), summarising their record of running libraries in the USA, suggests that the company has only been able to make their much-vaunted 35 per cent savings through reducing staff benefits and materials budgets. When “British taxpayers risk losing their own tax pounds to American firms” (Grice and Dutta, 2011), it is unclear how this latter model fits within the localist spirit of the Big Society. As with the outsourcing of library services to social enterprises, the danger of public sector involvement is a skewing of priorities so that efforts are focused on outputs or the countable – issue figures, membership etc., rather than outcomes – activities and initiatives that make a difference to the lives of local people and their communities.

Community empowerment

The second key pillar of the Big Society focuses on transferring power from the state to local people. Here, there is an emphasis on community residents having input into decisions that affect them, with more devolved decision making and greater control over local resources and assets. *The Localism Act* of 2011 (HMSO, 2011) was designed to introduce new rights and powers for communities, primarily to challenge local authorities over public services. Although Painter *et al.* (2011) have questioned the extent to which localism stimulates community empowerment, this strand of the Big Society programme is largely based on the assumption that increasing citizen participation in the practices of local government will give local people a greater say and investment in their local areas.

The *Big Society Audit 2012* (Civil Exchange, 2012) suggested that people in Britain were reasonably positive about local decision making and felt that getting involved locally could make a difference to their areas. Big Society supporters are adamant that a “renewed focus on empowering people within local communities is the only way to secure long-lasting positive social change and civic renewal” in the UK (Wilson, 2011, p. 157) while critics insist that the promise of devolution of power and greater

community participation is weak and empty, questioning how kindly local councillors will view empowered residents challenging their decisions (McCall, 2011). The evidence from the numerous protests about cuts to public library services around the country suggests “not very”. While we may question the role of the state in mobilising civic action, McCabe (2010) argues that the both national and local governments have been extremely successful in galvanising community action, primarily when their decisions have angered people. As with the demonstrations against library cuts and closures, though, these expressions of the people’s will and community opinion seem to have little impact on the decision makers.

Government initiatives to devolve power to local communities pre-date the Big Society. A White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, published under a previous Labour administration, laid a duty on local councils to “inform, consult, involve and devolve to local citizens and communities, where appropriate” (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006, p. 26). For public libraries, this has meant involving local people in the design and delivery of services and, again, there was considerable emphasis on this type of community engagement activity in public libraries before the Big Society. An analysis of community engagement activities in public libraries indicated that the sector has focused primarily on:

- making the library space available for community activities;
- working in partnership with local voluntary and community groups; and
- activities to support community involvement in various levels of decision making (Goulding, 2009).

In fact, the push for more and better community engagement was a feature of the last Labour government, perhaps best exemplified by the *Community Libraries Programme* which provided £80 million starting in 2006 to upgrade public library spaces in consultation with the local community (MLA, 2010). Although the final evaluation of the programme questioned the extent to which the library services involved were truly “deciding together” with local people rather than merely “informing” (MLA, 2010), it would be difficult to argue that this aspect of the Big Society is not positive, focusing as it does on involvement and local people working alongside library service professionals to ensure they are getting the services that are right for their community. Decisions about library service provision should be based on a clear understanding and knowledge of the local community and library services have been experimenting with more innovative ways of gathering users’ views and opinions as a basis for making decisions, although it could be argued that this is essentially user consultation as opposed to community engagement, and public libraries have been criticized in the past for consulting only those who already use their services. A recent report commissioned by the Arts Council England suggests that viewing “volunteering, user engagement and other forms of collaborative working simply as reducing costs, seems to miss the point” (Ipsos Mori and Shared Intelligence, 2013, p. 24) and highlights these practices as effective ways of forging a closer relationship with the local community. This seems reasonable except that these approaches are not cost free in themselves, taking staff time and effort, most of which is currently spent maintaining basic services in the face of budget cuts and declining staffing levels.

While public library services have been quite effective at involving local people in decisions affecting the service, it could be argued that their parent organisations (local councils) have probably not been as open. As suggested above, protests about library closures in England have been largely ineffective and while the UK has a system of representative rather than participatory local democracy, active citizenship as envisaged within the Big Society “should involve interactions between councillors and citizens, with councillors listening, hearing and explaining” (Jones and Stewart, 2012). Protests against library closures have had some success. Plans by councillors on The Isle of Wight to close nine of the island’s 11 libraries were amended in the face of fierce local opposition so that five were converted to volunteer-run libraries instead and thus “saved” for their communities. Individual libraries have also been retained from closure following local protests; Golbourne library in Bolton, for example, was saved following a campaign supported by local businesses and a petition signed by 4,000 local people (*The Bolton News*, 2013).

Other local councils have not been so ready to engage with their electorate over library closures, however. Some protests have become increasingly acrimonious, ending up in the High Court with local people arguing that there has been a lack of transparency in the decisions taken by councils which have not consulted sufficiently on plans for closures. While protestors taking this route have had mixed success, the fact that relations between local authorities and citizens have reached this point suggests that the Big Society agenda has not necessarily improved people-state engagement as hoped. The readiness of many council leaders to press ahead with damaging cuts to library services despite widespread local protests, petitions and appeals to the High Court seems to indicate that local councils are failing to involve local people in crucial decisions about local services, reflecting the results of the 2012 *Big Society Audit* which found that although 75 per cent of people think it is important they should influence local decisions, only 38 per cent of people felt that they could (Civil Exchange, 2012).

Social action

The final strand of the Big Society agenda to be considered is that of social action with a focus on volunteering. This area has undoubtedly provoked most recent controversy related to public libraries and the Big Society. In fact, it is probably fair to say that when considering public libraries in the Big Society, most people – librarians, policy makers and politicians alike – think first and foremost about the use of volunteers.

Two models of volunteer use in public libraries in England have emerged:

- (1) The involving model – where volunteers add value to the core service.
- (2) The devolving model – where groups take over the service.

Until recently, most activity in public libraries in England had taken place under model 1 – the involving model – although it should be noted that many public libraries across the UK have not had an established tradition of volunteering at all. As the Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) notes in their policy on volunteering in public libraries, volunteers have generally been very limited in number and have been used in ways that have not been particularly innovative, creative or expansive (SCLW, 2013). Friends groups have not been a notable feature of public libraries in the UK, unlike in the USA, for example. The only area of service in which volunteers have been used

extensively (and very effectively, in fact) is for services to the housebound where they help provide access to professionally run public library service. The RVS (Royal Voluntary Service) volunteers take library books and other resources to older people in their homes on a regular basis and provide a vital link to their local library. Aside from this established use of volunteers, the use of voluntary staff in public libraries in the UK has been an issue of some controversy in the past, amid professional and trades union concern that volunteers should not be used to compensate for the reduction or withdrawal of public library services caused by redundancies or the failure to fill vacant posts.

Ideally, volunteers should be viewed as a supplement to professional library staff, not an alternative for them (Cilip, 2012) but there are signs that this is a growing danger. Figures released in December 2012 showed a continuing increase in the number of volunteers alongside a continuing decrease in the number of staff employed (Cipfa, 2012). Staffing numbers decreased by 8 per cent (fte) while the number of volunteers increased by 8.9 per cent suggesting that concerns about “substitution” are very real. Not only is there disquiet about the impact on the quality of service provided but objections have also been raised that volunteers should not be introduced on a large scale at the same time as both front line staff (library assistants) and professional librarians are being made redundant because of cuts to local council budgets.

Nevertheless, there is recognition that volunteers can add value to public library services, undertaking additional tasks that library staff would be hard pressed to do given the declining staffing levels in libraries (SCL, 2013). Volunteering is also viewed as a good way of making libraries more representative of the communities within which they are based and so enabling them to reach out into communities, attract users from a wider cross section of society and perhaps also mobilizing support for the library within “hard to reach” groups, with volunteers becoming advocates for the library service (SCL, 2013). The success of the *Welcome to Your Library* project, for example, demonstrates that volunteers can connect with refugees and asylum seekers newly arrived in a community and introduce them to library services (www.welcometoyourlibrary.org.uk/ accessed 22 May 2013).

Public library services have been coming around to the use of volunteers over the last couple of decades, therefore, but the Big Society takes this a lot further and advocates handing over the entire running of libraries to volunteers from the local community along the lines of model 2 – the devolving model – leading to the development of community managed libraries (CMLs). Again, the movement towards volunteers taking over the running of local libraries when they were threatened with closure is not a new phenomenon; some have been established for more than five years, but the combination of the Big Society imperative and public sector cuts has made this approach very attractive for local councils struggling to make financial savings.

The most recent guidance to local authorities (ACE and LGA, 2013) describes two main types of CMLs with various models within these:

- (1) Independent community libraries which run without any involvement from the local council, including:
 - Asset owning CMLs which own their own premises.
 - Non-asset owning which do not.

(2) Co-produced community libraries, including:

- Community managed libraries usually without paid staff but often remaining within the library authority's network and retaining some council support.
- Community supported libraries which are council-led, funded and with paid professional staff but supported by significant input from volunteers.
- Commissioned community which is the social enterprise model discussed above, funded by the council which pays another organisation to deliver library services. To a certain extent this model could have been considered earlier in this paper in the discussion of the "public service reform" plank of the Big Society but it is included here to keep together the discussion of CMLs.

A variety of issues has been raised about the underlying philosophy and practicalities of CMLs. First, the status of some of the library models above is unclear – are they part of the local council provision and therefore subject to the provisions of the 1964 *Public Libraries and Museums Act* (HMSO, 1964) which made libraries a statutory local authority service in England and Wales? Where does accountability lie? There have been suggestions that those of type 1 may charge subscriptions for use, for example, as a way of funding their services but for type 2 this would be unlawful under the Act which states that no charges should be made for consulting printed material on library premises or for borrowing books or other printed materials. What happens if things go wrong with the service and a member of the local community has a complaint? Who is responsible? Rainford and Tinkler (2011) argue that there are grave concerns surrounding accountability and redress systems within the Big Society model and that local people who have complaints about outsourced services have been left to "shuttle to and fro" between those now responsible for the service and the funding or contracting council. It is unclear what safeguards have been established to ensure that the volunteers running libraries are accountable with regard to service standards and use of public money.

Second, there are concerns about the viability and effectiveness of CMLs. Some have undoubtedly been successful – they have increased use, become self-funding by being enterprising and attracting philanthropic donations and have become a true community asset, providing a friendly, public-driven service (Holman, 2012). Others have struggled, however, their use often falling substantially after volunteers took them over. The *Public Libraries News* (www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2013/04/fifty-shades-of-volunteer-library.html) web site gives details of the good, the bad and the ugly of community managed libraries. At Chalfont St Giles Community Library, which has been volunteer run since 2007, book issues are up, opening hours have increased and the bookstock is higher than when the council ran the library. Stothart (2012) also provides a range of examples of thriving community managed libraries although it is noteworthy that one of the leading volunteers of a successful CML interviewed for her piece says that the library should be run by paid staff. Others have not fared so well. The figures obtained by *Public Libraries News* from another five libraries showing book lending nearly halved in the best case and declined by six-sevenths in the worst. In addition, volunteer groups have often felt cast adrift by the local authority with little training and a lack of support on important responsibilities such as asset management

and legal issues (Holman, 2012). The WI (Women's Institute) found that the degree of support available to CMLs varied enormously but that, for the most part, volunteers were dissatisfied with the support available from the local authority (The Women's Institute, 2013).

Picking up on the "Big Society gap" identified by the 2012 *Big Society Audit* (Civil Exchange, 2012), it has been suggested that the CML volunteer-run models only work well in affluent areas with a large stock of people with the time and inclination to volunteer (Holman, 2012), a point also emphasised by the WI:

[...] communities with a high density of retired professionals are much better equipped in terms of time and resource to deliver a community managed library service than those in other areas such as urban communities or more deprived areas (The Women's Institute, 2013, p. 7).

Local authorities may also draw on the experience of other similar organisations using volunteers. A 2009 report about volunteering in independent museums, for example, estimated that even the smallest, seasonally run museum required a minimum of 5,000 volunteer hours from around 40 volunteers annually (Babbage, 2009). The report also suggests that economic and demographic change means there is increasing competition for volunteers and that the sector needs to make efforts to increase its understanding of a new generation of volunteers to engage them and attract them to volunteering. The *Big Society Audit 2012* (Civil Exchange, 2012, p. 51) concluded that levels of volunteering in the UK are relatively low compared to other developed countries and focused within a small "civic core" with 9 per cent of the adult population accounting for 51 per cent of all volunteer hours. Certainly, in some less affluent areas recruiting sufficient volunteers to run the libraries has proved a challenge. Phil Bradley (Cilip President 2012-2013) in a presentation to the Canadian Library Association Conference in 2012 drew attention to the situation in Rossington library in Doncaster (Bradley, 2012). One of 12 CMLs in the authority, Rossington library was struggling to find enough volunteers to keep operating just three months after becoming volunteer-run, with only ten of the original 25 volunteers remaining. Rossington is an ex-mining village in South Yorkshire with significant social and economic deprivation and it is likely that the people there are more focused on keeping body and soul together than volunteering in their local library, however valuable it is to them as individuals and to the local community. It has also been suggested that volunteers will question why they are working hard in their spare time to maintain a service that was until very recently funded through local taxes which they are still paying. One contributor to a post on the *Public Libraries News* web site who runs a successful CML commented, for example, "many volunteers would love to hand everything back to the County hands – let's face it the Volunteers are paying Council tax and doing the job themselves!!" (www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2013/04/we-now-have-six-examples-of-poor-to-terrible-performance-by-community-libraries-based-on-hard-data.html).

Local councils are presenting CMLs as an exciting opportunity to bring people together around their libraries and make them the hubs of their communities (see, for example, a press release from Surrey County Council, 2012). Doncaster Council, in vain perhaps given the developments at Rossington above, ran an advert inviting local people to volunteer to "sustain and provide" the library service (Business Doncaster, 2012). As indicated above, there are success stories which suggest this can be the outcome. More often, though, CMLs are established because of an implicit or explicit

threat, some have even called it emotional blackmail (www.publiclibrariesnews.com/campaigning/volunteer-run-libraries/cons), that if the community does not take over the running of the library, the library will close and local people will lose that facility. There are also concerns that encouraging the local community to take over the running of libraries will only delay the inevitable anyway and that while the library will be saved in the short-term, the long term effort of raising funds and organising the service will eventually prove too much for any band of volunteers, however much enthusiasm and dedication they begin with. The ACE and LGA (2013) guidance to local authorities acknowledges that ensuring long-term sustainability and viability for CMLs is a challenge.

Library campaigners and advocates are torn by the large-scale conversion of council-run libraries into CMLs. On the one hand, these libraries are being “saved” for the community and it is preferable that they remain open with the (probably dim) possibility that they will be taken back into local authority management if the economic situation improves and/or the CML model fails. On the other hand, the evidence of operational difficulties and the fact that not all communities have the appetite and/or capacity to run a complex public service like a public library leads many to fear that these libraries will “wither on the vine” (www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2013/04/withering-on-the-vine-six-year-figures-for-volunteer-branch-show-danger.html) and these developments are actually merely condemning them to a slow and lingering death.

Conclusion

A leading article in *The Independent* newspaper in 2011 suggested that libraries were one of the “soft targets” bearing the brunt of government cuts despite the fact that the library service “while outwardly non-essential, in fact has the potential to be at the heart of any Big Society” (*The Independent*, 2011). The analysis above suggests that public libraries are indeed delivering the Big Society agenda at grassroots level but at the core of the apparently irresistible tide of community managed libraries lies a drive for austerity and the localism rhetoric has become a convenient smokescreen for local councils for withdrawal from public library service delivery. The savings to be made from these developments are also questionable; some are a mere drop in the ocean in the grand scheme of things – £350,000 in the case of the Isle of Wight’s five volunteer-run libraries (Brown, 2013). Of course, local councils are in an unenviable economic situation and have to make cuts (and/or raise revenue) to meet Treasury requirements but in many cases it appears that decisions about public libraries are opportunistic and are being made on the hoof and in a panic to save money without proper consultation or consideration of other options. Significant savings could be made by exploring closer collaboration between library services and through shared services, for example, although it should be acknowledged that co-operation and partnership working often suffer when the financial environment is harsh as efforts focus internally on survival and crisis management rather than development. The political and economic climate is condoning the widespread use of volunteers to supplant or supplement paid library staff but whether this is a sustainable model remains to be seen. Public library services are too important to too many people to be a site of experimentation in localism and community empowerment.

Note

1. A number of web sites and organisations are documenting cuts to public library services in England and across the UK. See, for example: www.publiclibrariesnews.com/about-public-libraries-news/information (accessed 22 May 2013); www.cilip.org.uk/get-involved/advocacy/public-libraries/pages/default.aspx (accessed 25 June 2013); (accessed 25 June 2013); <http://voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/> (accessed 25 June 2013)

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