Northumbria Research Link

The challenges facing public libraries in the Big Society: The role of volunteers, and the issues that surround their use in England.

Abstract

The use of volunteers in English public libraries is nothing new, however their use is becoming ever greater and one may argue that we are increasingly seeing a mixed economy of public library provision, in the wider arena of the Big Society. This paper presents the findings of a Delphi Study of 15 Library Managers undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate exploring the challenges facing public libraries in England today, particularly focussing on volunteer use. An overview of relevant supporting literature is provided to help contextualise the research, particularly focussing on concepts such as the political background surrounding policy development, community engagement, the Big Society, and volunteering. Explanation of how the Delphi Study was conducted is given, together with a discussion of the key findings. Results show that opinions of Library Managers cover a broad spectrum. Although volunteer use is generally viewed by the respondents as a good thing, with potential to further enhance a service and aid community engagement, there are also a number of concerns. These concerns particularly relate to the idea of the volunteer as a replacement to paid staff rather than an enhancement to the service. Other key concerns relate to the quality of service provision, the rationale behind volunteer use, and the capacity of communities to deliver. Volunteer use in public libraries on this scale is a new phenomenon, and the longevity of such a development is largely unknown. This raises the question as to whether this is simply a large scale ideological experiment, or a move to even greater community engagement?

Keywords

Volunteers, big society, public libraries, delphi study.

Introduction

Public Libraries have been part of the English cultural fabric since the 17th century (McMenemy, 2009: 20), enshrined in law following the 1850 Public Library Act (McMenemy, 2009: 27). However, commentators argue that an 'impending cultural catastrophe' looms (McSmith, 2011) resulting from public spending cuts, and a drive by the current British Coalition Government (between the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties) towards a localism agenda through an Open Public Services White Paper (Minister for Government Policy, 2011).

A recent Culture, Media and Sport Committee investigating library closures, concluded that many local library authorities are in danger of failing their statutory duty of providing, a 'comprehensive and efficient library service' due to knee-jerk reactions to local authority cuts, and stressed a need to consider a new approach to the role of the Secretary of State in ensuring this statutory duty is adhered to. The committee also recommended that the government investigate the cumulative effect of the cuts on library provision by the end of 2014 (Culture Media and Sport Committee (2012).

However, one key theme that is pushed by the localism agenda (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011), and indeed the recent DCMS committee (Culture Media and Sport Committee, 2012) is the valuable role that volunteers have in the future running of the library service. Although volunteering in public libraries is not a new phenomenon, it is highly topical and is moving at a fast pace, with many library authorities exploring new ways of using volunteers. Increased use of volunteers in public libraries has been documented by a variety of commentators over the past few years, including the replacement of professional staff and the introduction of libraries run entirely by volunteers (community managed libraries) (May, 2011, Anstice, 2012, Page, 2010, Hill, 2010). The

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) figures demonstrate a recent drop of 8% in full time equivalent paid library staff for 2011/12, and an increase in volunteers of 9% which is likely to rise as further cuts are made (CIPFA, 2012). In addition CIPFA (Farrington, 2012) forecasts that 12% of all libraries will be community managed by 2013. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), the UK professional body, has recently updated its policy statement (CILIP, 2012) on the use of volunteers in public libraries, which clearly identifies that although volunteers are viewed as highly valuable with regards to the additional support they can provide, their role should not extend to core service delivery or replacing paid staff in specialist roles. The recent guidance from the government regarding volunteer-managed community libraries indicates a firm preference for this method of delivery as opposed to libraries staffed by paid professionals (Gov.uk, 2013), and has resulted in CILIP calling for ministerial clarification regarding the government's commitment to statutory public library services (CILIP, 2013).

This article presents the findings of the first phase of research carried out as part of a Professional Doctorate exploring the challenges facing public libraries in the Big Society[i], particularly focussing on the role of volunteers and issues surrounding their use. This phase was a Delphi Study involving 15 library managers in England, and attempted to explore the current situation with regards to volunteer use, and the resulting opinions and views of library managers in relation to that use. This article details the literature that surrounds this topic, primarily focussing on the English political environment, identifies the methodology adopted, and discusses the key findings from the Delphi Study.

Literature Review

The value of public libraries

A number of commentators extol the virtues of a freely available public library service, seeing it as a 'beacon of civilisation, a mark of what we as a country stand for.' (Lott, 2011). McMenemy (2009: 61) states that although 'public libraries in the UK were formed on the

back of suspicions about the leisure pursuits of working class people,' they provide an impartial accessible space that serves to enrich the cultural fabric of the nation and inform citizens. An 'information literate community relies on the public library to act as a gateway to responsible and accurate information, and that need is as vital as it always has been.' (McMenemy, 2009: 200) This view is further supported by CILIP, which argues that 'they [public libraries] stand for intellectual freedom, democratic engagement, community cohesion, social justice and equality of opportunity.' (CILIP, 2010: 1) Indeed many stress that the role of the public library is even more important in times of recession, acting as 'recession sanctuaries,' (Jackson 2009 cited in Rooney-Browne, 2009: 342) by 'playing a vital role in helping individuals and communities survive the economic downturn and successfully communicating their role as an essential public service' (Rooney-Browne, 2009: 348).

The power of public libraries exists in the fact that 'even while they may be low down the priority list of some local authorities, many people actually care about their existence' (McMenemy, 2009: 559). The evidence for this is clearly demonstrated by the actions of local communities when library closures are announced (see Hands Off Old Trafford Library, 2012 and Save Frien Barnet Library Group, 2013), backed up further by the fact that 90% of the adult population see public libraries as important or essential to their local community (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010b)

However, Pateman and Vincent (2010) consider the lack of clear vision nationally about what the role of libraries in modern society actually is, and show a regional approach to planning and developing library services is required that cuts across boundaries, involving partnerships, co-location, co-production and above all, taking risks where necessary. Winterson also acknowledges this confusion regarding the library's role and argues that a clear distinction needs to be made between the concepts of libraries, leisure and culture, and the importance of what she describes as 'these people's palaces of books where everyone can go from early in the morning til late at night' (Winterson, 2012).

Indeed, the recent Arts Council Chief Executive's response to the research project, envisioning the library of the future, talks of four priorities for 21st century public libraries: Their place as the hub of the community, making the most of digital technology and creative media; ensuring libraries are resilient and sustainable; and delivering the right skills for those that work in libraries (Davey, 2013).

'Public libraries are at a pivotal point. They are much loved and expected to continue offering the same services as they have for many years, but they are also expected to respond to big changes in how people live their lives' (Davey, 2013: 2).

Reductions in public library usage

Grindlay and Morris (2004: 611) consider the reasons for reductions in book issues from public libraries since the 1980s. They broadly fall into two categories, the first being due to a reduction in public spending initiated by the Coalition government, and the second being a change in values and behaviour on the part of the general public.

'Perhaps more significant for borrowing is the fact that book funds and opening hours have both suffered' (Muir and Douglas, 2001; Audit Commission, 2002 in (Grindlay and Morris, 2004: 623). Other leisure activities are now competing with public library use, but more importantly 'many people have switched from borrowing to buying books' (Audit Commission 2002 in (Grindlay and Morris, 2004: 623).

CIPFA (2012) recently reported that visits to library premises have fallen in 2011/12 by a further 2.4%, and adult book issues and active adult borrowers are also continuing on a downward trend. This is in direct contrast to children's book borrowing, which has increased significantly, and 'has been on the rise for the past six years, with almost 80% of 5-10 year olds now using public libraries' (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011c). The challenge will be whether such usage is maintained as the children turn into adults.

However, it is also important to consider that public libraries are not just about book loans (Pateman and Vincent, 2010: 143). Libraries have a role to play that extends beyond the physical confines of the building now incorporating an online dimension, which further challenges the measurement of use and value to the local community of such phenomena.

In response to the decline in usage, the now defunct MLA (Museums Libraries and Archives Council) examined the concept of community engagement as a mechanism for encouraging more people to actively use public libraries. The New Labour Government introduced the 1999 Local Government Act (Goulding, 2009) which included Best Value, and the use of strategic partnerships, followed by a white paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities, that included a move 'to devolve power to communities and give local people a greater say over local public services,' (Goulding, 2009: 38) thereby enhancing citizenship and service delivery. This culminated in the Community Libraries Programme in 2006 (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011a: 7).

The concept of community engagement will be considered in greater detail later in this paper, but first it is useful to examine the political background that exists.

The Political Background

When one examines the political sphere in which public libraries operate, this clearly influences their existence and purpose. 'The adoption of free market economic policies and the goal of reducing public expenditure, to be achieved partly through rate capping, (has) meant that many local authorities had to reconsider their budgets and spending priorities' (Makin and Craven, 1999).

Mirroring Keynesian economics, Pateman and Vincent (2010: 2) consider the 'Boom and Bust' librarianship of the past 40 years in the UK, ranging from the boom of community librarianship in the 1970s, to the bust of the Thatcherite policies of the 1980s, to the boom of

New Labour's social inclusion agenda during the 1990s, to the bust of reduction in public spending from the current Coalition government.

The influence of politics on the public library sector has been well documented by Usherwood (1993 in McMenemy, 2009: 127), who confirmed that 'elected members' viewpoints on libraries clearly illustrated that the party affiliation of the member governed in many ways how they saw the library service.' Pateman and Vincent (2010: 142) agree, arguing that public libraries are not politically neutral as they 'carry political 'loads'.' Indeed one can see such actions by the responses of library authorities to the current cuts, and the choices that have been made (Arts Council England, 2013a).

Considering this further, McMenemy (2009: 1) considers the impact of neo-liberalism on public librarianship, that is 'the belief that ultimately the market and the individual within the market should have primacy.' He argues that the resultant drive towards internal competition amongst services, emanating from a bidding culture, income generation, league tables and viewing citizens as consumers has resulted in 'a vacuum of ideas,' (McMenemy, 2009: 404) and a challenging situation.

It can be argued that the adoption of Neo Liberalist ideology for the Coalition government is clearly seen in their current responses to policy making. They are keen to cut public spending, and remove the bureaucracy of central government through increased localism (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011).   'Cameronian Conservatism' is a term considered by Mycock and Tongue (2011: 56) which 'seeks a shift from state to social action by breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power to neighbourhoods and making government more accountable.' An overriding theme of the Coalition government is that of localism and the Big Society. These concepts will be explored later, however initially it is useful to consider previous government policy, and community engagement.

Community engagement

Community engagement was very much a key feature of New Labour Government policy of 1997-2010, and is defined as 'involving the community in decision making. It is about the community identifying needs and working in equal partnerships to address these. Libraries can take these opportunities to deliver on key targets and agendas; to widen participation contributing to community cohesion; or to increase active citizenship and thereby increase use of library services' (MLA 2006 in Museums Libraries and Archives Council (2011a: 11).

The benefits of community engagement are seen as multiple. Research into 29 examples of community managed libraries, whereby volunteers were used to support service delivery, demonstrated a variety of strengths from using this approach. The key factors were improvements in access and provision, and economic and social benefits through a strategic rather than reactionary approach (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011b: 7).

Partnership working is viewed as a key factor in advancing the economic, social and environmental health of a local community (Goulding, 2009: 42), in addition to enhancing local planning and engagement. Common characteristics for success are identified as 'public sector...support, co-location, enterprise, open transfer of ownership, specialist staff support and a clear sense of social purpose'(Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011b: 9).

Challenges and issues resulting from such practices essentially revolve around the 1964 Public Libraries Act and the importance of continuing a core service, de-professionalization, the scale and timeframe of the changes proposed, and the effect of localism. The latter refers to the fact that community engagement may vary according to the community it originates from, and social demographics can affect the ability of a community to effectively engage (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011b: 13). This concern is echoed by CILIP, who argue that deprived communities don't have the necessary social capital to provide services (Hall, 2011: 4).

However, where such partnerships have worked, they have provided the potential to enrich the community with 'voice' and 'choice' (Pateman and Vincent, 2010: 139).

A related and useful concept to consider at this stage is social capital, that is 'a community resource that enables people to work together to bring about positive change.' (Griffis and Johnson, 2013: 2) This research examined the contribution of public libraries to the social capital of a community, and established successful use of public libraries for this function was more prevalent in urban areas, where users may not have access to other mechanisms by which to achieve this. Putnam (2000 in (Hardill and Baines, 2011: 24) argues that such engagement has a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of a community, and works to 'mitigate the effects of socioeconomic advantage.'

Scott (2011) sees libraries as the physical place helping to strengthen communities, and play a key role in community building. They are 'an inclusive third space' (Scott, 2011: 207) which are a true indicator of a democratic society, and should be viewed as a critical stakeholder in a community.

Big Society

In direct contrast to community engagement, the present Coalition Government has introduced the concept of localism. This term can be interpreted in a number of ways, but for the current government it enables 'people and their locally elected representatives to achieve their own ambitions. This is the essence of the Big Society' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011: 2).

The concept of localism and the resulting civic engagement are not new. Putnam (2000) discussed the idea of social capital some 13 years earlier. He argued that the creation of social capital is not an easy task, and requires both individual and institution changes in order to facilitate true civic engagement (Putnam, 2000: 143).

The Big Society is therefore an integral part of the mix required for the advancement of the wider localism agenda (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). It is seen by the Conservative Party (2013) as concerned with 'putting more power in people's hands - a massive transfer of power from Whitehall to local communities (thereby resulting in) people encouraged and enabled to play a more active role in society.' The Big Society (initially the idea of Phillip Blond in Kisby (2010: 486) is for the current Prime Minister, David Cameron, the ''big idea' that will underpin Coalition Government's policy making over the coming years. Its core themes...are empowering communities, redistributing power and promoting a culture of volunteering' (Kisby, 2010: 484). It is viewed as a place where 'people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and the communities; a society in which the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control' (The Conservative Party 2010 in Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010a: 1).(Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010a: 1)

The Coalition Government states that poor public service standards are reinforced by 'an outdated approach to organising....that is out of step with the way we live now' (Minister for Government Policy, 2011: 7). Such views are seen as not being 'based on ideology, however...are driven by an ideal of people power - a belief that people know better than politicians' (Minister for Government Policy, 2011: 7).

There exists a broad spectrum of opinion as to the merits of the Big Society, and how such a panacea should be enabled. There are many benefits of pursuing a Big Society agenda, and key areas include, citizen involvement, the belief that everyone has assets, building and strengthening social networks, using local knowledge and transforming the welfare state (New Economics Foundation, 2013). Devolution of public services, and the encouragement of local communities taking over services, is viewed by Downey et al (2012) as creating increased social value whilst also saving public money.

Some commentators however, are sceptical as to the underlying motives for such an approach (Reed, 2011), arguing that what the present government aims to do is simply break up public services. Mycock and Tonge (2011: 56) further argue that 'it is a smoke screen for public service cuts through the promotion of volunteers as a cut-price alternative to state provision.'

In contrast, the New Local Government Network (NLGN), an independent think tank interested in the transformation of public services and a keen advocate of localism, argues that 'if it is to emerge at all, the Big Society will grow out of local action and initiative, not prime ministerial speeches and central programmes. The concept is by its nature, social, local and community based' (Keohane et al., 2011). The NLGN sees a key role for public institutions and local government in the formation and nurturing of the Big Society (Keohane et al., 2011), in addition to ensuring an equal distribution of community action, and avoidance of regional equality (Keohane et al., 2011). Key indicators of the Big Society being belonging, volunteering and civic participation (Keohane et al., 2011). CILIP, in addition, argue that 'public libraries could be key in delivering the big society agenda, but so far the role they could play has not been clearly articulated' (CILIP, 2011).

Sceptics worry that such policy is arguably a continuation of Thatcherism, with a focus on the role of the individual, rather than reliance on the state. 'Big Society is really aimed at mobilising individuals and communities to do more to look after themselves, to compensate for the impending massive cut-backs in public services.' Williamson (2010: 44) argues such an individualistic policy can be viewed as unlikely to succeed without reliance on additional redistributive policy, aimed at reducing inequality.

Others argue that there is very little difference between the concepts and outcomes of community engagement and Big Society, except for the fact that the former appears to view the state as the driving force, and explicitly considers the need for tackling inequality in society. Within the context of the Big Society, the view of an active citizen is that of a

philanthropist and volunteer, rather than a politically literate citizen through community engagement.(Kisby, 2010) Kisby (2010: 486) argues that the responsible citizen 'does not represent a significant break with New Labour in this regard so much as a continuation, albeit with greater intensity, especially, perhaps, in the context of the country's dire financial position.' However he argues that a redistributive state is essential, otherwise the inequalities in certain sectors of society will impede the success of the Big Society.

This view is similar to that of the NLGN which considers 'rather than the state stepping back in the coming years, it requires a new model of local community leadership, a mindset of community involvement rather than state expenditure' (Keohane et al., 2011: 107). The state indeed has a role in supporting the development of the Big Society, particularly where social assets are fewer. 'These areas will need to receive extra support if we are not to see a widening gap between communities in this country' (Keohane et al., 2011: 107).

Other concerns identified with the success of a Big Society include the issue of 'citizen overload', with people neither having the time or desire to play their part (Mycock and Tonge, 2011: 56). There is a danger that existing volunteering initiatives are likely to be impacted upon negatively, with 25% of our population already engaged in voluntary activity (DCLG Citizenship survey 2009 in (Mycock and Tonge, 2011). Cuts in public services also impact negatively on volunteering opportunities available (Anon, 2011a). Sceptics warn that the Big Society is simply outsourcing existing public services, leading to poorer working conditions, reduced service quality and privatisation (Reed, 2011).

Volunteers

Volunteers are a key feature of the Big Society, with a further increase of those volunteering at least once a year to 71% in 2012 in England (Anon, 2013). A key policy message of the Coalition Government's Decentralisation and Localism Bill emphasised the importance of volunteers, social enterprises, charities and other voluntary and community groups

(Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010a: 20). Volunteering is not a new concept for public libraries (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011a), and can be defined as 'any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organisation' (Wilson 2000 in (Lynch and Smith, 2010: 81).

Within the past few years the increased public library use of volunteers has been documented by a variety of commentators, including the replacement of professional staff, and libraries run entirely by volunteers (May, 2011, Anstice, 2012, Page, 2010, Hill, 2010).

As mentioned earlier in this article, the number of volunteers used by public libraries in 2011-2012 increased by 8.9%, whereas the number of FTE paid staff reduced by a further 8% (CIPFA, 2012). In addition the roles that such volunteers undertake is also changing, a recent Unison survey of library staff (Davies, 2013: 26) detailed that 45% of respondents stated that volunteers were used to do jobs that were previously done by paid staff.

The benefits of public libraries using volunteers has been well considered by the now defunct Museums Libraries and Archives Council (2011a), with a clear model (see Figure 1) used to clarify the inter-relationship of the benefits to the service, the volunteers themselves and the community in which they operate. Not only does the library service have the potential to gain capacity and resource, and access to a range of community voices, but in addition the volunteers can gain skills and well-being, and feel part of the wider community, which in turn creates networks with the local community. This then facilitates community engagement.

[Insert Figure 1 here: MLA model: Connecting service to the community]

In contrast, there are a number of negative aspects of volunteer use. These include loss of professional librarian skills, especially when cost cutting is a concern, in addition to staff losing their jobs to be replaced by volunteers (Anstice, 2012). CILIP policy on use of volunteers in public libraries clearly states that although it supports the use of volunteers for supplementation, it is not the case for job substitution (CILIP, 2012).

Social demographics mean that there is inevitably likely to be variation in the willingness for certain communities to take part in volunteering. (Anstice, 2012) The baby boomer generation has been argued as requiring innovative volunteering opportunities that may differ from previous generations, creating possible challenges for volunteer opportunity providers (Williamson et al., 2010).

Volunteers are not without a financial cost, they have to be recruited, selected and trained adequately, in addition to legal checks, in order to ensure that quality is maintained and mistakes are avoided. (Anstice, 2012) 'There is a dearth of research and discussion on the 'employment' and management of volunteer workers,' (Lynch and Smith, 2010: 81) with a greater concentration on the motivation of volunteers, rather than their management. Although it does appear that there is a move towards greater formalisation and professionalization of volunteer management in recent years (Cunningham 1999 in (Lynch and Smith, 2010: 82). Anstice (2012) also argues that use of volunteers results in double taxation, in that the community still has to fund the libraries that are not supported by volunteers.

Hill (2010) sees over-reliance on volunteers for library service provision as flawed, and that without professional staff, there is a likelihood that standards will drop. In addition it can be argued that not all people are suited to being a library volunteer, which can impact on the service, such that 'ineffective volunteers can take a toll on the employee workforce and lead to negative personal and organizational outcomes' (Wandersman and Alderman 1993 in (Rogelberg et al., 2010: 435). Poor relationships between paid staff and volunteer staff can also result in increased stress and dissatisfaction on both sides. Wandersman and Alderman (1993 in Rogelberg et al., 2010: 425) identified that the use of volunteers caused additional stress for paid employees, due to personality clashes, volunteers not pulling their weight, lack of communication, disagreement over how to handle certain situations and negative volunteer attitudes towards paid staff. They concluded that an active volunteer management programme helped to alleviate some of the issues. 'The greatest challenge for volunteer-

involving organisations would appear to be achieving the balance between the informality that complements the characteristics of volunteer management and the need for formality' (Lynch and Smith, 2010: 93). Wilson (2012) in his review of volunteer research, acknowledges the challenges of conflicting interests and potential short-term commitment of volunteers, in addition to a number of social factors that affect the propensity of an individual to volunteer or not.

The Future Libraries Programme was established by the Coalition Government to consider new ways to further the role of the Big Society in library provision. Ten projects were selected which considered issues such as efficiency savings, alternative governance, and the sharing of library services across authorities, including use of volunteers (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011a, Future Libraries Programme Project Team, 2011). Recent reporting from the initial findings of the first round of the Future Libraries Programme concluded that such initiatives would not work fully without a lot of initial work, relationship building, and time, and should not be viewed as 'a quick fix to stop closures' (Anon, 2011b: 10). In addition '"community management" does not emerge as the answer either – although it seems the Libraries Minister has decided to go for it in a big way' (Anon, 2011b: 10). Final analysis of this programme identifies 4 emerging themes with regard to library reform and change, in order to deal with the challenges facing public libraries: Shared services across library boundaries, review of the location and distribution of service points, new provider models and delivery, and divesting library assets and services to community ownership/management (Future Libraries Programme Project Team, 2011: 2).

Arts Council research into future libraries concludes that although there is a continued need for a public library service, they 'expect to see a shift from a service provided to a community to one in which local people are more active and involved in its design and delivery' (Davey, 2013: 4). There is a brief mention of volunteers and their potential for adding capacity and

new skills to a service, and the fact that this is a growing trend, however they are also keen to stress that there are a variety of approaches depending on circumstances.

Perhaps there needs to be clear articulation that the 'Big Society is not about abdicating responsibility. Volunteering needs to be managed. It is not to displace experience and skill but to build community action with the library as a key resource for others' (Dolan, 2010: 9).

Methodology

This research uses an interpretivist approach in order to explore the socially and historically constructed meanings surrounding relationships with, and representations of Public libraries. The interpretivist paradigm, 'the net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological and methodological premises,' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 13) essentially considers reality to be 'multiple, constructed and holistic' (Pickard, 2013: 12).

Denzin and Lincoln aptly describe the approach in the context of a patchwork quilt maker, the 'interpretative bricoleur (that) understands research is an interactive process shaped by one's personal history, biography, gender. social class, race, and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting' (2011: 5).

Such an approach therefore aims to interpret social reality from a subjective viewpoint (Corbetta, 2011: 23), what Creswell describes as a 'personal lens that is situated in a specific socio-political moment' (2003: 182). Such interpretations or meanings are 'varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas' (Cresswell, 2003: 8).

Because public libraries are a social construct, bound in a complex political and social world that is still evolving, adoption of an interpretivist approach allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon in such a way that allowed individual voices to be heard and recognised whilst uncovering the reality that was constructed firstly by individuals within the research, then by the group.

Qualitative Approach

As Pickard states (2013:13) 'there is no doubt that a research paradigm implies a research methodology,' which for this particular research project is qualitative. The qualitative approach whereby 'the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives, (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern)' (Cresswell, 2003: 18) is well considered by Gorman and Clayton (2005: 5) who detail the following key features:

- Contextual - in that data are gathered in a natural setting

- Description: the researcher attempts to express and interpret the reality that they investigate

- Process – the researcher focusses on the context and process to better understand the area being investigated

- Participation – the researcher seeks to fully understand what people believe and feel, and how events are interpreted

- Induction – the researcher explains happenings through evidence collected as part of their research, in order to create a full picture of what is happening

- Transferability of findings – 'rich pictures' may be provided in order to allow for transferability based on contextual applicability

In terms of the last feature, Pickard also adds, 'thick description' allows for the findings to be transferred to other settings based on similarity rather than assumed 'sameness' (Pickard, 2013: 20).

In addition the relationship between the researcher and subject is such that the investigation may indeed influence the research situation (Guba 1981 in Gorman and Clayton 2005: 26)

and must be acknowledged, what Corbetta describes as a psychological involvement (2011: 40). The emergent nature of intereptivist inquiry is such that not all salient issues can be identified at the outset and it is likely that, as the research progresses, further issues and questions will emerge (Cresswell 2003: 182). 'The research design must therefore be 'played by ear'; it must unfold, cascade. Roll, emerge' (Lincoln and Guba 1985 in Pickard, 2013: 14). An initial research model as been designed that allows for the iterative nature of the research process whilst providing a framework for planning and development.

Research Methods

The research comprises two stages each utilising different research methods; Phase 1 applying a Delphi Study, and Phase 2 focussing on two case studies. Figure 2 shows the structure of the entire research study. The initial Delphi study, which is the focus of this article, was chosen in order to gain a clearer picture of the phenomenon being investigated at a strategic level.

[Insert Figure 2 here: Structure of proposed research]

The Delphi Study

In order to investigate initially how library authorities in England are currently using volunteers, and associated views and opinions surrounding this, Library Managers were invited to take part in a Delphi Study via e-mail. This study involved obtaining 'the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts…by a series of intensive questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback' (Dalkey and Helmer 1963 in Pickard 2013: 149). 'Delphi may by characterized as a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem' (Linstone and Turoff, 2002: 3).

Library Managers were contacted initially through the Society of Chief Librarians, applying what Corbetta terms 'judgement sampling'(2011: 222), whereby participants are chosen on the basis of some characteristics that are highly significant to the questions being asked. The Society of Chief Librarians primarily comprises Public Library Managers, who have a strategic overview of service provision, including use of volunteers. As such, they are in a unique position to provide the detail necessary for the first phase of this investigation. Judgement sampling is one of the many possible approaches to purposive sampling (Gorman and Clayton, 2005: 128), and aimed at providing a rich and varied picture of the current situation, and therefore establish as clear a consensus as possible (Cape 2004 in Pickard, 2013: 150). A total of 15 library managers responded to the initial contact, and these formed the basis of the Delphi study.

As the Delphi Study ensures anonymity from other participants, it was hoped that open and honest answers to what could possibly be a politically sensitive topic could be ensured (Pickard, 2013: 152). Clearly this anonymity is compromised to some extent when the group of 'experts' are already known to each other but membership of the Delphi Study is not revealed and at no point during the stages of synthesis does the researcher attribute comments to an individual. Three rounds of the Delphi Study were conducted, in order to investigate the possibility of consensual opinions arising, whilst keeping to a strict timeframe. It was important to establish a relationship of trust with all participants as this method requires substantial commitment to the process over a period of time and in this case, also required commitment to a second phase of case study research. Trust was achieved initially by developing a rapport with all participants through email, and telephone, and ensuring all actions were clearly explained and carried out as agreed.

Data Collection

A questionnaire was emailed to the 15 participating Library Service Managers, this being the 'only acceptable form of data collection within traditional Delphi method' (Pickard, 2013: 151). Written responses to specific questions provide the audit trail of interpretation which is necessary as the researcher synthesises the responses and ideas as they develop during subsequent rounds.

A series of open questions concerning motivations for using volunteers, and issues surrounding their use were asked initially, that attempted to answer the objectives set by the original research proposal:

- Numbers of volunteers in their library authority

- How they use Library volunteers

- How they currently recruit, select and train library volunteers

- What do they perceive to be the value of using library volunteers

- What they view as the benefits of using volunteers for the Library service, paid staff, volunteers and the wider community

- What they view as the issues surrounding the use of library volunteers

- How volunteers work with paid staff

- What their view is of formalised policy regarding volunteers

- The future of library volunteers

- Any other issues

After round one all responses were collated, summarised and sent out to respondents for further comment. The second and third rounds of the Delphi Study summarised findings, and attempted to ask further questions that emerged, clarified uncertainties, and gained consensus of opinion where appropriate. The final summary report of the findings, which is the focus of the following part of this paper, was disseminated to all respondents.

Delphi Study results and discussion

Before the Delphi study results are discussed, it is useful to consider the diversity of library authorities represented. Roughly half the library authorities were based in the north of England, with the other half based in the south. Four authorities were Unitary district, five Metropolitan district, and the remainder two tier counties. Total electorate in the authorities in 2012 ranged from 80,338 to a maximum figure of 852, 476; area of the authorities in hectares ranged from a minimum of 6,441 to 803, 761. As a consequence the variation in volunteer numbers will be influenced by authority size. (The Local Government Boundary Commission for England, 2012)

According to Delphi respondents the number of volunteers working in the library services surveyed ranged from 17 to 850 in number. Interestingly this largely tallies with the size of authority in that the smallest number is from the authority with the smallest electorate, and the largest from one of the largest authorities in the sample. The modal figure regarding volunteers was about 100 per library authority, although there were three authorities where this number was much higher. With regard to the past 5-10 years the majority of respondents stated their number of volunteers has increased, and roughly half of all respondents stated that use of volunteers was set to increase significantly in the next 5-10 years.

As Maxwell argues ' the use of numbers is a legitimate and valuable strategy for qualitative researchers when it is used as a complement to an overall process orientation to the research…(and) does not inherently make the research a mixed method study' (2010: 480). Rather such use of basic statistics helps the reader to 'correctly characterise the diversity of actions, perceptions, or beliefs in the setting or group studied' (Maxwell, 2010: 478).

[Insert Figure 3 here: Volunteer Roles]

The roles of volunteers were extremely diverse (see Figure 3), ranging from specific role definitions to more generic areas that volunteers assist in. Roles relating to home library services, story time and assistance with computers were relatively longstanding. As has already been discussed, volunteering is not a new concept for public libraries (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2011a) and is very much part of their normal functioning. Roughly half of respondents agreed that the range of volunteer roles had increased greatly in the past 5-10 years, particularly those related to the augmenting and adding of value to library services, and supplementary tasks that included IT support, and shelving. It is likely that this increase stems from the community engagement agenda of the previous New Labour Government. In terms of the future there was less consensus over volunteer roles, although a third of respondents did admit that volunteers may have to do work currently undertaken by paid staff if budgets further decreased and libraries were to remain open. This pragmatic realisation is viewed by some respondents as an inevitability, if there is to be a library service at all. There was some caution however regarding the quality, and inclusiveness of a service delivered by volunteers. Such a change in volunteer roles from additonality to replacement is documented in a recent survey of library staff members undertaken by Unison (Davies, 2013). Although 92% of those who answered agreed with the premise that volunteers should not be used to replace staff, 45% of respondents detailed that volunteers were now being used to do jobs previously done by paid staff (Davies, 2013: 27).

When Delphi respondents were probed further about the distinction between paid staff and volunteer roles in a library there was a consensus of opinion concerning the need for there to be a clear division, which would help avoid confusion and work towards the benefit of the users and the service provided. Such an arrangement required flexibility and mutual respect on the part of paid staff and volunteers, and a clear understanding of roles. There was concern from one respondent that such a situation was unworkable.

These opinions largely mirror what CILIP advocates. A recent policy statement (Local Government Association, 2012) on use of volunteers in public libraries indicates a clear emphasis on the role of volunteers in a supportive rather that substituting role. In addition CILIP's recent response to the Government Select Committee report into public library closures (Anon., 2013), argues for further research into the, 'actual value added or damage done to library services through the use of volunteers before they can be accepted as a legitimate means of library support' (Winterson, 2012: 7).

Recruitment, selection and training of volunteers is reported as being a formalised process by the majority of respondents, with a variety of measures used to recruit volunteers including technology, word of mouth, former staff, leaflets and posters. This aligns with the move towards greater formalisation and professionalisation of volunteer management in recent years (Cunningham 1999 in Lynch and Smith, 2010: 82).

Use of intermediaries, such as volunteer organisations and schools, in addition to other local groups and networks also assisted with the recruitment process for some respondents. In addition half of respondents mentioned they had, or were planning to have in the near future, a member of staff with specific responsibility for volunteers based within the library service, or the wider local authority. The importance of training volunteers and investing money in their development was also seen as important. Weighted ranking of the main components of a volunteer training strategy considered induction, and an agreed line manager as the key factors in ensuring the effective use of volunteers.

In addition the use of a formal written policy for volunteers was seen by the majority of respondents as vital to ensure clarity with regard to roles and responsibilities, and adherence to service priorities.

Gay (2000b in Hardill and Baines, 2011: 55) comments on the growth of volunteer management as a profession, and the specific skills set required for successful

management, including co-ordinating and developing volunteers, leadership, representation and campaigning.

The remaining discussion of the Delphi Study concerns the benefits and issues of using volunteers identified by respondents, and primarily relates to the key stakeholder perspectives: library users, the wider community, library service staff, volunteers and the library service itself. In addition, the later rounds of the Delphi survey asked respondents to rank benefits and issues, and most popular concepts will be discussed in further detail.

[Insert Figure 4 here: Benefits of Volunteer Use for the Library Service]

A key finding from assessing the benefits of volunteers to stakeholders (as seen in Figure 4) is the clear inter-relationship between different sets of stakeholders, although the focus differs slightly for each set of stakeholders. The key benefits to a library service identified by the respondents were to do with service enhancement and extension, in addition to enabling the service to more fully engage with the local community as volunteers. Such initiatives were viewed as potentially a way to get new blood into the library service and expand the potential audience of library users, for example the use of young people in reading challenge initiatives. As might be expected library service benefits often translate into the other stakeholder benefits, and there were strong links between the different sets of stakeholder benefits. Regarding staff benefits, volunteers were seen to help support staff in their working, thus enabling them to concentrate on the more valuable key roles appropriate to their skills and expertise, thereby taking on tasks that help to enhance the service provided further. Exposure to a more diverse set of people more likely seen in volunteers, was seen as a key benefit to the working of paid staff.

When respondents considered the library users another clear connection between the benefits of stakeholders emerged, with service enhancement, and better access to staff receiving high ranking.

For volunteers the benefits are viewed as primarily a personal function, yet also about the wider community they exist within. Giving something back, helping the community, fulfilment, work experience and enabling social contact are proposed, however one can argue that such individual acts also naturally result in a wider community benefit. In order to establish the benefits for an individual in volunteering one must examine the motivations for volunteering. Merrell (2000 in Hardill and Baines, 2011:396) argues that 'people volunteer for a complex mix of altruistic and self-interested reasons and that volunteers are both "givers" and "takers"'. Hardill and Baines (2009 in Hardill and Baines, 2011: 45) draw on cultural theory to consider the motives and patterns for volunteering: hierarchy (giving alms), and fatalism (getting by), which have a high degree of social regulation; and individualism (getting on), and egalitarianism (giving to each other), which have a lower degree of social regulation.

Delphi Study respondents noted that these individual acts help to strengthen overall community cohesion, and enable community ownership thereby enhancing the democratic nature of the library service. This is in keeping with Putnam's (2000) in Hardill and Baines' (2011: 117) analysis of social capital, and the importance of volunteering as a key indicator of social capital. It is also important to note that these benefits considered in the Delphi Study relate primarily to the concept of additionality in a service, rather than staff replacement.

(Insert Figure 5 here: Issues of Volunteer Use for the Library Service]

Issues for all stakeholder groups from the viewpoint of the respondents were examined, and weighted ranking graphs provided for all groups. Figure 5 above demonstrates the key issues for the library service as a whole, and as would be expected they encompass many of the other perceived stakeholder issues identified by respondents.

The move from additionality to replacement of staff by volunteers is viewed as the predominant service issue. There are also concerns regarding the conflict that would arise

as a result of this move, with a significant number of jobs under threat, and paid staff feeling less valued. The capacity of a community to fill the gap with willing volunteers is also viewed by respondents as an important issue, especially where deprivation results in a demand for paid work as a priority. In addition the benefits system may impact on what an individual can do as a volunteer.

These concerns are mirrored by CILIP (2012: 6) who also stress that it is, 'imperative that reductions have been properly planned within an agreed framework set out in a Library Strategy and based on proper local needs analysis.' They argue that loss of skilled staff reduces 'the capacity of services to innovate and change, to shape services to the needs of local communities, deal with complex enquiries and work in partnership with a whole host of organisations' (The Guardian, 2012: 6).

Delphi Study respondents also highlighted the hidden costs of volunteer use, and stated these were often misunderstood by politicians. Sufficient quality and integrity of service provision requires well trained and committed volunteers, which in turn demands focussed volunteer training and management. In addition respondents highlighted that there was a danger the library user may not distinguish between paid staff and volunteers, and thus confusion and possible frustration may arise on the part of the former. This is something that is identified by Wandersman and Alderman (1993 in Rogelberg et al., 2010: 425) as a key problem.

Respondents felt that safeguarding issues and appropriate role allocation require a well managed volunteer programme, an increased role of the part of paid staff to deal with this, and the additional challenges that may arise as a result of paid staff and volunteers working together. Volunteers often have a certain perspective on what a library and its paid staff do, and what they as volunteers can do – and this may not necessarily match the requirements

of the service. As Wilson (2012: 195) states 'it is widely understood that volunteers and staff are not only co-dependent but also have conflicting interests.'

It should be noted that these issues stem from the library managers rather than the wider stakeholders, and exploring the actual perspectives the latter in a case study setting, would help to uncover the discrepancy between perceived and actual outcomes.

Essentially politics has a key role in all of this – the politics of a local community may affect volunteer rates in addition to how the community responds to any changes and how the local authority approaches their budget cuts.

[Insert Figure 6 here: The Future of Volunteer Use for Public Libraries]

Respondents' views concerning the future of library volunteers (see Figure 6) covered a variety of topics, but the most prevalent related to the largely untested assumption that sufficient volunteers exist to increase service provision, and the fact that different communities will react accordingly. Such worries are not unfounded. In a recent report on community libraries, Arts Council England (2013b) considered a variety of community managed approaches all making use of volunteers. They raised the concern that those communities from disadvantaged areas may not be capable of rising to the challenge asked of them (Arts Council England, 2013c), yet ironically may be those most in need of a library service and the benefits to community it brings (Arts Council England, 2013b).

Related to the capacity of volunteers were other respondent concerns over libraries run wholly by volunteers without professional involvement, and the related lack of understanding, skills and knowledge that such volunteers may have with regard to the running of a library service. They also stressed that the role of a library volunteer is likely to develop over time. It is interesting to note that Arts Council England (2013b) acknowledges that their current research focuses predominantly on the establishment of community libraries, rather than their running, and as such the management approach and skills required by volunteers may change.

The other key concern of respondents related to the devaluing of paid staff, and this is an area that Arts Council England (2013b) discusses with regard to the proper planning of any move to volunteer use in a library service, stressing the importance of meaningful consultation with all stakeholders (including staff) in order to gain 'buy-in' and to benefit from in-house advice and experience. They stress the role of partnership working in such arrangements, and the benefits that this can bring.

Indeed, another topic identified by respondents related to the need for partnership working with volunteers and other agencies in order to ensure the sustainability of library services, and this very much mirrors Arts Council England's views emanating from their research on future libraries (Arts Council England, 2012).

This demonstrates the positive 'saviour' roles identified for volunteers by respondents regarding the future. Volunteering is viewed as a growth area, being used increasingly to tackle the problems of keeping libraries open. It also has the potential to create volunteers as positive marketing ambassadors in communities not responsive to libraries.

An interesting future issue which ranks at the half-way point on chart 4 relates to the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act (Great Britain, 1964) and whether it is sufficient as legislation in a new and different environment from the one experienced nearly 50 years ago.

A final consideration of other issues on the part of the respondents largely reiterated previous concerns, particularly relating to the long term sustainability of a volunteer operation, and initial catalysts for such a move to volunteer led libraries. Communities have the potential to be divisive, with a number of groups all with their own agendas. Such agendas might not necessarily be that of the library authority, and this may cause friction between the overall vision and what is actually delivered.

One respondent however differed quite markedly from the other respondents in their final summing up of the situation – they viewed volunteer use as an opportunity. 'Volunteer use should be viewed as natural customer engagement, not a threat but a promise. Many of the

issues identified in round 2 related to a deficit model and identified volunteer use as a problem, not an opportunity. We love the new perspective, energy and enthusiasm that volunteers bring to the work, it is wholly positive' (Anon, 2012).

Thus, community involvement should be trumpeted, at the same time as professional staff development, supporting a mixed economy of library service delivery. This last point is in keeping with the views of Arts Council England (Davey, 2013) who conclude that public libraries need to encourage more future-proof and innovative ways of working, in order to remain resilient and sustainable. This should be developed in tandem with the continued importance of professional skills and experience, and quality leadership.

In summary, it is clear that the issue of volunteer use is a highly subjective one, with a variety of viewpoints on the matter. Interestingly, the final round of the Delphi Study brought out some of the most honest opinions and viewpoints, perhaps as respondents felt that this was their final chance to have their say. The comments below illustrate the consensual concern of the majority of respondents:

'The underlying problem is that 'communities' are divisive. They split people into smaller and smaller 'communities of interest' and in the end they are all fighting one another.   Most people are, at heart, selfish – there is no Big Society………there is no recognition of what the next community along the road may need.'

'I believe that we will do what the politicians want and reduce the quality and value of the entire library network, which will then start to crumble. To misquote Bill Clinton 'fix the roof when the sun shines, not when its raining'. Currently it is both physically and metaphorically raining on libraries'

However, the following comment stood out as very different from the other respondents, demonstrating a more positive outlook.

'Target the 'have nots', the 'haves' will argue and defend libraries regardless of whether they use them or not, the have-nots need them whether they know it or not and will do so

increasingly. The word volunteer is a problem [just as the word patient is in health world]. Stop stereotyping and start listening – especially to organisations far ahead of us in this. It really is not our library service'.

 It is clear that perspectives on volunteer use are moulded by who we are, our political beliefs, where we work, and the individual political/economic situation that we find our library service in.

Conclusions

Overall, it would appear that Library Managers' opinions surrounding this topic cover a broad spectrum and many concerns have been raised. They demonstrate the challenges that lie ahead for library services throughout England.

Volunteer use has increased for all respondents and there are a variety of roles performed, although many past volunteer roles were mainly supportive in nature. There does appear to be an increasing trend towards roles more closely associated with community managed libraries. The range of roles has increased greatly, and a third of respondents acknowledged that with budget constraints and the need to ensure the survival of library services, there was likely to be an increase in roles that covered the traditional remit of paid library staff. However, there was a clear consensus concerning the requirement for a clear division between roles of paid staff and volunteers.

The importance of a formalised process is seen by the majority of respondents as paramount, in addition to the presence of a member of staff whose key role is to manage volunteers, and their recruitment/training process. Volunteers are viewed as not a free option, but one that involves substantial investment and training, together with a clear volunteer policy, in order to ensure adherence to overall service aims and priorities.

Volunteers are generally viewed by respondents as a good thing, with the potential to further enhance a service, and aid in the engagement of the local community. Such community involvement has a key role to play in promoting the democratic all-inclusive nature of a library service. But not all is rosy in the garden, as such benefits tend to relate primarily to a library world of additionality rather than replacement of staff. Respondents consider that conflict is a likely outcome of increased volunteer use for a variety of functions, in addition to increased expenditure in order to support future volunteer development.

At present library services are predominantly perceived as something the public own and trust (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010b) with high satisfaction ratings (Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010b). However, there is concern from respondents about the effect of volunteers on the quality and integrity of the library service. Research conducted by the Audit Commission (2002) in a report by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council detailed (2010b) 'that very high satisfaction levels may be partly driven by users' loyalty to services and a desire to protect them.' Whilst increased volunteer use could result in even greater loyalty, it could act to the detriment of service quality perception if users consider their service is being undermined.

The future use of volunteers appears an inevitability for respondents, it is perhaps the only way forward in times of economic uncertainty. However the capacity of communities to deliver is a key concern, and the potential dearth of interest in areas of high deprivation is an issue.

Such developments need careful planning, in order to enable a joined-up service that meets the needs of users and the wider community served, through a clear vision. The involvement of meaningful consultation with all stakeholders, particularly paid staff, may ensure that a true partnership is formed that achieves buy-in from the latter, in addition to clearly demonstrating that such a process has been carefully thought out to the wider community.

Looking to the future Arts Council England states 'the phenomenon of community libraries in England is in its infancy today. A stronger network of community groups and local authorities involved in establishing community libraries is needed to promote the exchange of know-how, facilitate study visits and help generate ideas. Further research will also be beneficial in helping us understand how the different approaches are working out in practice' (2013c: 9).

Volunteer use of this scale in libraries can be argued as a new phenomenon, and the longevity of such a development is largely unknown. Public libraries are in transition: a gigantic ideological experiment, or a move to greater community engagement? This will perhaps depend on the politics of the reader, however the reality is very much with us and strategies to ensure that user needs are met that fit the local community they emanate from are perhaps key. A variety of stakeholder perspectives will be examined through case studies in the next phase of this research in order to provide thick description of this phenomenon within its own multi-layered context.

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[i] The Big Society (initially the idea of Phillip Blond in Kisby (2010: 486) underpins much of the current coalition
Government's policy making. It essentially is a cultural change which relies on the self-sufficiency of people,
and has an agenda of social action, public service reform and community empowerment. According to
Cameron (2010), the role of the Government, in order to achieve the Big Society is to 'foster and support a
new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action' Cameron, D. (2010) *Transcript of a speech by the Prime
Minister on the Big Society, 19 July 2010* [Online]. Available:
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