Libraries Unlimited

DEVON LIBRARIES AT THE HEART OF COMMUNITIES

Introduction

In 2016, Devon County Council took the decision to create an independent charity to operate the county's library service from which Libraries Unlimited was born. Since then, Devon has been leading the way for innovation in the library sector. In the last ten years, as part of Libraries Unlimited, Devon's libraries have evolved to become vibrant centres at the heart of their communities.

Our society is facing many challenges, with the cost-of-living crisis, increasing isolation and the pervasion of misinformation being just a few of them. As society seems increasingly divided, libraries remain trusted, welcoming, and above all, free spaces. They are often the last physical outpost of publicly funded service in a community, particularly in a rural county like Devon.

At Libraries Unlimited, our mission has been to enrich lives and build communities. We are proud of the part we have played in developing the library service over the last ten years. But for us, this is just the beginning.

Devon County Council are currently undertaking a consultation on the future of the library service in the county. We recognise that in times of increasing funding pressures there is a need to make savings by reducing budgets. However, it is vital that any changes build upon the innovation already in place, using the learning of the last ten years to develop a sustainable model that works for Devon. In fact, we believe that the future should place libraries even further in service of their communities, working directly with them to create resilient and bespoke spaces that can continue to serve local people whatever the future throws at them and still remain part of a vibrant county-wide network of professional library services.

In our response to the consultation, we want to demonstrate how the library service in Devon can be imagined from the community up rather than county down.

Investing in Libraries is investing in communities

At Libraries Unlimited, we continue to make the case that funding for libraries in Devon should be restored and maintained to enable us to provide this vital service across the county.

The value for money spent on the library service is enormous, with every £1 spent generating £3 of social impact value for the county. The work that libraries do has a huge impact on key Council priorities such as child literacy, economic inclusion and isolation in older people.

Libraries provide a literal lifeline to the most vulnerable in communities, and we believe cuts to the library budget will only lead to increases in other Council spending as the impacts of reducing the funding of a vital preventative service are felt.

We are better together

We understand that fully funding the existing library service might not be possible in the current financial climate. This is not unique to Devon, indeed many councils up and down the country have looked to make cuts to their library service.

For many councils this has meant giving libraries that would otherwise close, over to community groups (e.g. Somerset and Dorset). Some have thrived and others have had more difficult journeys. For others it has meant permanent closures.

In the consultation documentation produced by Devon County Council, two models are identified; Cornwall and Lincolnshire. In both cases, large numbers of libraries have been handed over to community groups. This model may have been appropriate for those counties, but as we know all too well, Devon is unique.

From Salcombe to Ilfracombe and everything in between, the county is geographically diverse, and this is reflected in the different needs and priorities of its communities.

Whilst some communities might be able to support managing and running a community library, for others this would be incredibly challenging. We feel Devon needs the flexibility and innovation to create fifty solutions for fifty different communities, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

In the consultation documents, Devon County Council refer to the county as being an ‘outlier’ in the way library services are delivered. In this, we believe Devon has a massive advantage; an independent library charity operating county-wide, that already has connections in all these communities.

We already work with communities to strengthen the services we deliver. Now we feel these relationships can be further built upon, working together with local communities to build individual solutions to mitigate changes to the library service that may come about as a result of the consultation or future threats if funding remains under pressure.

We know that people in Devon love and value our libraries, we see that every day. In fact, last year there were 2.3 million visits to libraries across the county. Part of what makes that possible is experienced, knowledgeable and diligent library staff who work across our network.

We believe that working together rather than splitting apart offers the greatest chance to preserve professional staffing across the county, maintaining access in areas that could not otherwise support it, and working with communities who want to enhance the service through volunteering or other support.

At Libraries Unlimited, we have a proven track record of bringing grant funding into the county. As one of the first library services to be accepted as a National Portfolio Organisation by Arts Council England, over the last six years, we have received over £1m from ACE alone in funding and delivered tens of thousands of cultural events across our library network. Last year, we secured £1.5m from the National Lottery Community Fund to deliver Together for Tomorrow, providing funding to local climate action groups throughout Devon over the next five years.

We can do this because of our experience, reputation and capacity to deliver through our network of libraries and professional staff in a way that individual libraries could not.

Not only do we use grant funding to deliver great benefits to communities in Devon, but we are also able to work with other groups to deliver services to people through our network.

Our work with the NHS and the Council to make blood pressure monitors available to borrow at libraries across Devon demonstrates the value of maintaining a connected and professional service across the county and is a template for how more could be delivered in the future.

Resilient Libraries mean resilient communities

Whilst we see individual community strategies as part of the short-term solution to any changes as a result of the consultation and the current funding pressures, we also see them as the start of a journey towards building a network of resilient libraries operated by Libraries Unlimited and supported by their communities.

For every library in every community (and maybe new libraries in new communities) the path to resilience is different. But in every case, communities will need support and expertise to help develop and enhance their libraries.

We have already worked with our library Friends and other community groups over many years to improve, develop and protect services and we are in a strong position to take this further, working with local communities to help develop volunteering, identifying and improving funding applications and facilitating additional staffed hours where funding is available.

We want to encourage and support communities to own their library buildings, ensuring that there is always a space for their library no matter what the future holds. Some of our libraries are already lucky enough to operate from community buildings and this has been a huge benefit to them.

It can seem challenging, but with the right support, communities can develop robust funding streams that will help support their libraries into the future. By working together, we believe we can develop resilient libraries that will always have a place at the heart of their communities.

What does that mean for now?

If the changes proposed in the consultation are implemented as suggested, Libraries Unlimited is committed to:

- Working directly with local communities to develop individual library support plans that will help to mitigate the impact of the changes

- Build and develop stronger relationships with town and parish councils to facilitate any available support for vital local services

- Where people want to support their library through volunteering, we will work with them to recruit, train and organise volunteers, building on the excellent work of our library extra volunteer sessions already happening in multiple libraries

- Ensure that all the amazing services you have come to expect as part of the Universal Library Offer continue to be delivered across libraries in Devon

- Developing our ambition to have a thriving library network by securing national funding for the county and continuing to ensure Devon is at the forefront of library innovation in the UK

- Working with Devon County Council and others to identify further options for delivering additional services through the libraries by building on the success of baby weigh stations & blood pressure monitors

What does this mean for the future?

- We will develop a new library strategy to set out our vision for Devon's library service beyond our current contract. One that is built in conjunction with communities and embeds them at the heart of the strategy

- We will work with and encourage communities in which Devon County Council doesn't currently fund libraries to find solutions that could establish and develop the library service there, particularly in new and growing communities

- We will work with communities to develop longer term, sustainable funding and other forms of support that can help bring resilience to the library service across the county

- We will expand and diversify delivery across the county to bring books closer to people

Conclusion

We believe that the future for Devon's libraries is best served by continuing as a county-wide charity running the network of libraries. But with the future of library funding uncertain, we know we can't do this alone.

We believe each library needs and deserves their own specific individual plans, developed with local communities, local partners and responding to local needs. With Libraries Unlimited this can be offered with all the benefits and support of being part of a wider network. Plus the access to funding and professional expertise we offer as a charity.

By working together, we can build a resilient library service from the community up.