



## A review of UK libraries in 2017

• A guide for delivering sustainable, community-centric services



# Foreword

## **Nick Poole**

Chief Executive of CILIP,  
The Library and Information Association

 @NickPoole1

I would like to thank Axiell UK for producing this report to support the development and delivery of modern public library services. It provides valuable insight and practical advice to develop life-changing library services that make the greatest possible difference to the communities they serve. It is clear that the skills and expertise of library staff are critical to the sustainability and success of all public libraries. I welcome Axiell's recommendation that public library staff make the most of big data and analytics to improve services and better understand needs, usage and value.

Implemented and managed correctly, using technology to extend opening hours means more local residents can use the library at times that suit them. We must remember that a library is much more than a building containing books – it's a place where people can get help and advice to find work, set up a business, improve their health, meet and learn new skills. Trained, skilled library staff make this difference; they turn a building into a thriving community hub.

# Introduction

According to a Libraries Taskforce document, Libraries Deliver, more than half of the UK population has a current library card. With 225 million physical visits to public libraries in England in 2015 and 96 million visits to institution websites they are one of the most popular and trusted public services.

Clearly, public libraries, like all services delivered by Local Authorities, are under pressure to cut costs, while continuing to deliver services that suit the requirements of today's citizens, which have evolved significantly from book lending.

In a blog for the government's Libraries Taskforce, set up to help reinvigorate the public library service, the library blogger Leon Bolton writes that the impact of deficit reduction and austerity has led to the decrease of central government grants to local authorities and the drive to devolution in England. He notes how "The Localism Act has made a particular impression on libraries as councils seek to balance the budgets and devolve decision-making powers to individuals and communities. This has led to greater local involvement in running libraries through community groups and volunteers."

In a recent article in the Guardian newspaper, Nick Poole, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals (CILIP), points to the need to take action to revive the public library, quoted as saying: "In an age where there is a great need to arm the population with information and opportunities....it's time to stop talking about the dismantling of library services and instead to demand action."

Today, there are about 3,600 council-run libraries in the UK. This report explores the challenges that are facing these institutions, drawing on research from 2017 - a survey of library professionals from 150+ public libraries - and the 1,000 UK adult citizens from 2016's survey, to understand the opportunity to reinvigorate this long standing and important community service.

What's clear from our research is that Librarians matter, volunteers are here to stay, and that libraries are still valued, especially as a means to improving digital inclusion. But in an age of information they must compete by remaining open for longer, improving their online content and services, and leveraging technology and data to benefit from the marginal gains that can be so crucial in tough times.

# The role of the public library

In 2010, The Museums Libraries and Archives Council published a report entitled "What do people want from libraries", which highlighted the reasons why people visit libraries. These included the love of reading, discovering new things, but also a desire for social contact. But there has been incredible change since this was published, and change of such an order that few would, or could have predicted.

Yet in today's digital age, the library building itself remains important for different user groups to meet and interact, particularly those who may feel more isolated, such as the elderly, students and the unemployed.

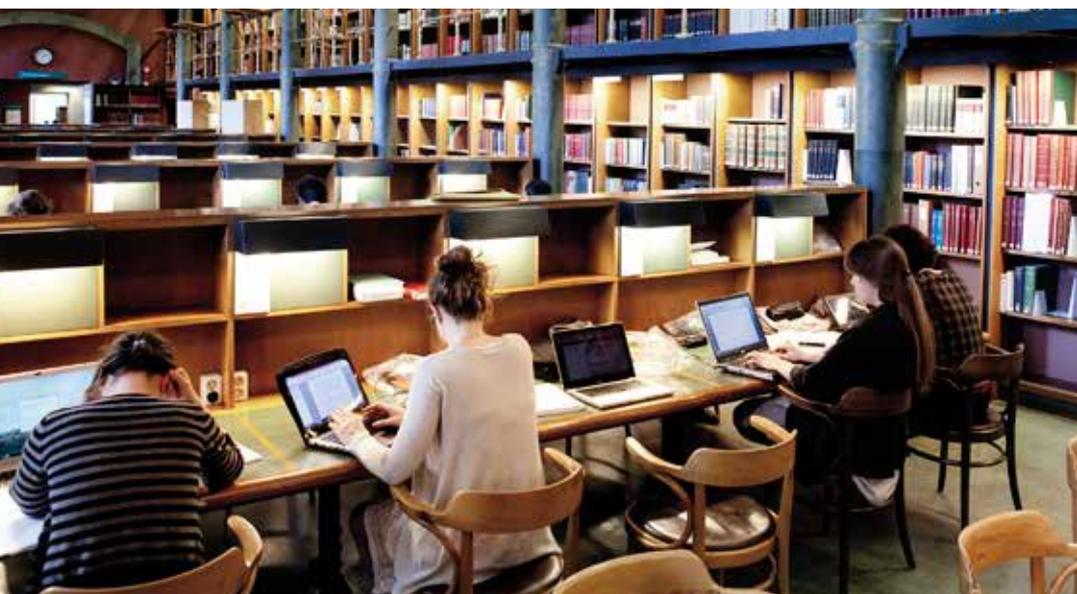
Our own research in 2016, "The Library of the Future", looked at why adults visit their local libraries. For the 75% who confirmed they make visits, reading was still a key reason, with 65% using the library to borrow a book to take away and 36% reading in the library itself. However, 29% also said they used their public library to access the internet and almost a quarter (23%) used the facilities to study or carry out research.

According to Arts Council England's (ACE) report, "Envisioning the library of the future", there are four priorities for libraries. These are identified as:

- Place the library as the hub of the community
- Make the most of digital technology and creative media
- Ensure that libraries are resilient and sustainable
- Deliver the right skills for those who work in libraries

Axiell's 2016 report makes it clear that people value the services that public libraries provide and will continue to do so. But that there are also challenges, including how technology has changed the way people choose to connect to information and culture.

Limited opening times can be a barrier for some people to engage with libraries, whereby public libraries simply don't fit into their lifestyle and/or alternative sources of information are preferred. To become competitive, libraries will need to adapt and evolve by thinking about how their offer can be distinct in the face of such competition. They need to make library services easy to access, whether online or in the library.



# A vision for the public library

The Guardian article by Simon Jenkins from December 2016, titled “Libraries are dying – but it’s not about the books”, states that the strength of libraries does not lie in books as such, but in readers and their desire to congregate, share with each other and experience books in the context of their community.

When asked about the different roles of the public library, our research, carried out with library professionals, shows that 94% agree (75% strongly) that libraries should act as a central meeting place for the community. This is supported by 98% agreeing it is important that library staff actively engage the community through events and other activities to develop reading, learning and creativity.

Library professionals know that services need to evolve beyond the library’s tradition role, with only 4% strongly agreeing that libraries should focus only on literacy and reading. They also recognise the opportunity for libraries to do more to engage with local communities and become a key place of congregation.

Today, libraries must consider and explore ways to expand their services and offer different activities and experiences to encourage engagement, whether through technology, in person or by delivering a new range of services to the community. One example, which some local authorities are starting to adopt already, is to integrate their cultural offer and provide communities with easier access to resources and community spaces from across libraries, heritage, leisure and more.

This approach serves to streamline both the customer experience and the way that council services are delivered; in these times of change this seems a pragmatic way to go.

## What should a public library offer? (percentage of library staff that agree)



**81%**

Resources, knowledge and experience curated and disseminated by trained staff



**79%**

Access to all cultural and heritage resources that are managed by the local authority



**80%**

Help to ensure non-English speakers are represented in their communities



**70%**

Support to local businesses with resources and mentoring



**92%**

Content and offers tailored to the specific needs of the community



**96%**

Information, resources and support for patrons with disabilities

## The importance of library professionals

According to CILIP, the job title 'public librarian' covers a wide range of professional roles based in local libraries, including citizen/customer engagement and to be facilitators of a variety of services. With sustainability being such a key focus for libraries in 2017, as highlighted in Arts Council England's report, it is useful to understand that sustainability is about more than just cutting costs; it's about achieving a balance between low cost and high value.

To this point, it is worth considering the emergence of more and more community-run libraries and whether they offer libraries the basis for the sustainable model that they are seeking. When asked, 71% of library professionals felt that having trained staff on site at a community library was critical and that the library would not be sustainable without them. In contrast, only 3% said that having trained staff within a community library made no difference to the successful and sustainable running of a community library.

If trained librarians are critical to the running of public libraries, then it is interesting to explore the various services these professionals need to support and provide. When asked about the role of a librarian, being an advocate for the institution to the local authority is seen as the number one responsibility, which highlights a perceived need to promote the value of public library services to the authorities that fund them.

Librarians therefore have the difficult task of simultaneously providing value to their patrons, and proving this value to budget holders and other stakeholders within the local authority. To do this the right tools and technologies need to be in place that can aid library staff. These tools need to let them add value, i.e. by delivering services to patrons rather than getting bogged down in administrative tasks, but also provide a way to quantifiably evidence the value the library provides, for example, through data and analytics.

## How crucial is the role of a trained librarian with regards to the sustainability of the library?

### ● Critical

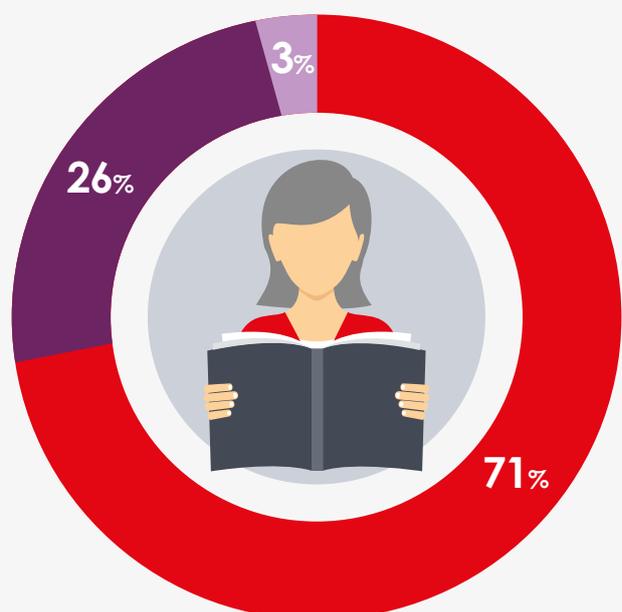
The community library could not be sustainable without the involvement of a trained librarian

### ● Important

The community library service is improved with the involvement of a trained librarian, but could manage without one

### ● Not important

It makes very little difference, the library could run successfully and sustainably without one



Introducing library automation and self-service systems to extend opening hours without relying on trained staff is one approach to assist with service provision and reach. Two-thirds of library professionals agree that this will improve equality through greater access to literature and learning materials for those who cannot attend the library during regular hours.

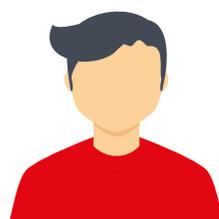
Evidence from other countries, for example in Sweden, where 'open library' technology is much more established, supports this view, with Emelie Ljungberg, Librarian at Hjarup Library, commenting, "what we have noticed is that there are more fathers with children that visit the library during the extended opening hours."

### What does the role of the librarian involve? (percentage of library staff that agree)



97%

Advocating and promoting library services within the local authority



81%

Managing and recruiting staff and volunteers for the library



93%

Curating and managing content; digital and physical



95%

Focusing on ways to improve and promote literacy and reading to the community



88%

Improving equality by supporting the people in the community



82%

Acting as a contact point for people in the community wishing to access any public service



80%

Ensuring the smooth daily running of the library, setting up and managing events etc.



63%

Ensuring the library is commercially viable and sustainable

Furthermore, the LGMA reported from the 'open library' trial in Tullamore in Ireland that "the feedback from members of the public is extremely positive, with users commenting that the library is now much more accessible for commuters, students and families".

## How libraries can close the digital gap

We live in a digital world where digital skills are now important in all aspects of modern life, including education, finance, finding jobs and accessing important information.

The Good Things Foundation, a charity that supports digitally and socially-excluded people to improve their lives through digital, believes that libraries have the potential to close the digital skills gap and reduce social inequalities. This is because libraries are trusted and accessible places that are staffed by people who are committed to opening up learning to their local communities.

Our research shows that 99% of library staff believe that libraries have an important role to play in closing the digital divide in communities. A similar number of staff agree that libraries help reduce digital inequality and social exclusion. When asked if libraries should promote and advocate the digital inclusion agenda, 97% agree (79% strongly). Only 10% said libraries should not be responsible for digital skills training, however, there's a concern about the delivery of such training, with 79% saying they are not well equipped to do so.

The Government's Digital Skills Strategy highlights libraries as an important channel through which they can deliver skills for a digital economy. Whilst libraries do good work in this area already by providing digital skills training and "a trusted network of accessible locations with free Wi-Fi, computers and other technology", the survey highlights the need for the Government to do more in order to meet its stated ambition for libraries to be the "go-to provider of digital access, training and support for local communities".

Some libraries have delivered training through private partners, such as Google, Barclays and BT, however there needs to be a more holistic view that considers how all libraries can better equip themselves to bridge the digital divide on a larger scale to tackle digital exclusion.



## Case study: Invent and Create Day, Kirklees libraries

### Overview:

Led by Kirklees Libraries as part of British Science Week, Huddersfield library was taken over for a day of education, invention and experimentation, engaging local children and families with STEM subjects and encouraging family learning.

### Aim:

To build engagement with the community, encourage learning and increase the number of visitors to the library

### How it happened:

- The day was funded with a £500 community grant from the British Science Association
- Developed using a network of partners who helped to support and build a variety of engaging activities
- Used volunteers to support the event; also encouraged volunteers from other Kirklees libraries to shadow and learn to run their own events

### The outcome:

Visitor numbers to the library were doubled – 1,000 to 2,000 visitors in a day

### Comments from visitors:

"I came with 4 beaver scouts. They loved it. I think they liked the cardboard city the best because they spent the most time there. It enabled them to be creative and learn building and planning skills"

"fabulous addition to mainstream learning which is becoming increasingly limited in scope"

"I loved the den building because you had your own mini tools and it inspired me to want to be a builder or designer"

May aged 9

"I liked the electric copper and how it went so shiney – mine looked so cool! Please can you come again and do different things?"

Stephie age 10

"What a FAB event! Stayed 2.5 hours – could have stayed for 6! Loved the den building"



# Extending library services into the community

Our research looked at ways that public libraries are currently taking their services out to their communities and it reveals a clear drive to connect with people outside of the library. Only 2% of libraries do not engage with the community outside of the physical library space, with large numbers using school visits, local events and other community services to extend their presence.

## How do you engage your community outside of the library building?



Mobile library services



Attend local events



Visit other community places e.g. hospitals, youth centres



Host our own events



Visit schools



My library does not engage outside of the library building



There is a clear desire to provide sustainable library services across the community, but there are also barriers to doing so.

In 2016, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) released figures as part of its annual survey of library authorities in the UK, with reports highlighting the UK's public libraries sector took a £25m hit to its budgets in the financial year to March 2016. So it's no surprise that key challenges lie in funding and staffing the services, and providing the technologies to support them.

In 2016, Plymouth City Council announced that it was closing 10 of the city's 17 libraries, moving out of expensive community buildings that were seen to be under-used and transferring services online. The council's motivation for this move is to transform and modernise library services by embracing the digital world.

However, the remaining seven libraries, including the central library, account for 80% of all visits and 75% of all items borrowed, and so the council aims to refurbish these libraries with new computers and meeting rooms. Additionally, there are plans for pop-up libraries, click-and-collect services in children's centres and community hubs, and an expanded home service for housebound residents.

What the council is trying to achieve is a good balance between online and digital support and a building for community congregation and engagement.

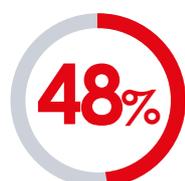
## What are the main barriers to finding a sustainable solution to taking your library out to the community?



Funding (i.e. to buy equipment to facilitate taking the library to the community)



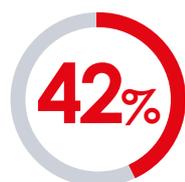
Staffing the services



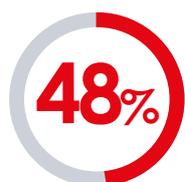
Training employees / volunteers



Not having the right technology or mobile devices



Lack of IT support



Logistics in taking the library out to the community



There are no barriers to taking our library out to the community

# Leveraging volunteers

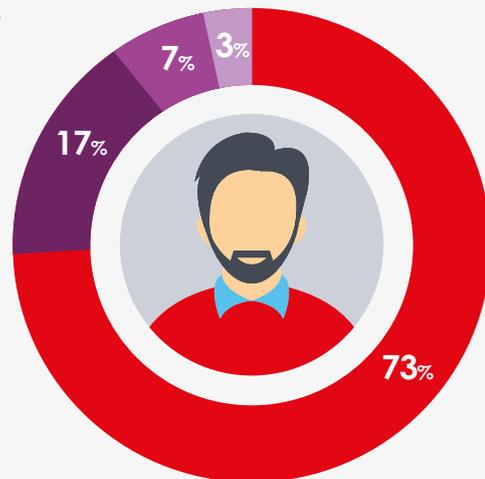
As we have revealed, the role of the librarian is varied and demanding. Finding ways to share those responsibilities with others without impacting the public purse becomes vital if a library is to stand a chance of delivering both existing and new services.

The Leadership for Libraries Taskforce believes that the involvement of volunteers in supporting paid staff in running public libraries can be valuable in expanding the services available and ensuring close collaboration and engagement between public libraries and the community.

Our research shows that 83% of public libraries make use of volunteers – a figure that is supported by the Community libraries guide by the Libraries Taskforce, which highlights that community library models that are council-led and funded are usually run with paid professional staff, but given support by volunteers.

## To what extent does your library use volunteers?

- We mostly use paid staff, with a handful of volunteers
- My library does not use volunteers
- We have a handful of core staff, but the rest are volunteers
- Our library is run solely by volunteers



Some communities are going one step further and actively volunteering to run library services on their own. For example, in the article, "Communities needing libraries as much as ever", a community member in Wiltshire shared that she lives opposite a red phone box that was converted into a community book exchange. Every day 15 to 20 people visit and drop off and collect books, and enthusiastic villagers clean the booth every week. It's a story that speaks eloquently to how libraries can be run for and by their communities.

When asked more specifically about the challenges respondents faced when using volunteers in their libraries, the primary issues are around the time invested in recruiting, managing and supporting volunteers. Interestingly, more than half of library professionals who use volunteers cited a lack of availability of these people to support the library.

It is also interesting to note that there has been a rise in community libraries – which are libraries that are run by volunteers. As of February 2017, there are at least 446 volunteer-run libraries in the UK.

In fact, many local authorities already work in partnership with communities in delivering their library services and the Libraries Taskforce has developed the Community libraries: good practice toolkit to not only help establish community libraries but to also help ensure that they are effective, efficient and sustainable.

The Upper Norwood Library Trust, for example, aims to deliver a full range of community activities, hosted by and run for, the local community in Upper Norwood and at a more sustainable cost to the council, which is facing severe budget pressures. This shows that volunteers are a valuable asset to communities and their libraries.

## The top ten challenges of using volunteers

1	82%	The time investment that is needed to manage and support volunteers	
2	62%	The time investment needed to recruit volunteers	
3	62%	The level of commitment among volunteers	
4	58%	The time needed to train new / casual users on systems	
5	55%	A lack of volunteers available	
6	49%	Dealing with a lack of awareness about the library service among volunteers	
7	45%	The level of churn among volunteers	
8	35%	Securing the correct security and permissions to keep data safe	
9	31%	Restrictions on allowing volunteers to carry out data entry remotely	
10	11%	Providing enough PCs / devices to allow volunteers and staff to access systems simultaneously	

# Helping your libraries deliver

The Libraries Taskforce report, “Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021”, highlights how “libraries are vital community hubs - bringing people together, and giving them access to the services and support they need to help them live better.”

Here are five practical ways to reinvigorate your library services to meet the evolving needs of your community.



## 1. Work with volunteers

The work that libraries do is all about community engagement and there are a number of public libraries that work with volunteers. As described earlier in this report, budget cuts and the impact of localism means that volunteers in libraries are here to stay. But they can be very helpful to libraries when used in the right way, so try and engage them. Use volunteers as a complementary service, ensure that they are supported by members of trained staff to help build confidence in their roles and optimise the value from your workforce. Seek to offer a framework of non-financial rewards and recognition to build a sense of team and belonging and to keep motivation of volunteers high. Staff and patrons should equally be empowered by a sense of community that you seek to foster, so remember that this will resonate with volunteers more than anyone.

When you engage and involve your community members you will encounter and inherit a whole new range of skills and knowledge. Embrace this, make the most of these new skills to feed back to the rest of the community by encouraging your volunteers to share their expertise and experience through new events, workshops or in other ways, either in the library or online.

**“Volunteers help make the library more diverse and reflective of the community, they will be your most passionate advocates, helping to bring the community together.”** – Anthony Hopkins, Head of Library, Heritage & Adult Education Service, Merton Council



## 2. Use cloud computing to help you take your library to the community

Using mobile phones and tablets can be very handy when it comes to going out into the community to engage with patrons, whether it is for a home visit or a scheduled pop-up at an event. With mobile technology you can be much more flexible to the needs of the community, meeting them on their terms in places other than the library, whether at schools or community centres.



## 3. Reach out to and involve your community

A modern librarian has an important role to play in driving community engagement and promoting the library's many resources and services. With a diversified offer, be sure to address different people within the community with different messages; messages that are relevant to their specific wants and needs. Carefully selecting offers and keeping up with regular, personalised communications ensures the community is well informed about the library's activities. It's this level of communication and personalisation that helps create your library's identity and builds a deeper relationship with the members of the community. By

improving your understanding of the community, you can tailor your future events to make them more likely to be successful and relevant. In order to do this you need to use simple, user-friendly tools that can help you understand and interpret the data you keep about your patrons, so that you can act upon this data in a targeted and systematic way.

This report also highlighted that engaging your community in volunteer programmes can benefit the library service when used in the right way. But it's important to use tools that are simple and user-friendly to make it easy for not only volunteers to learn the system but also for staff to teach them how to use it. This simplicity eases the burden on trained members of staff and will give volunteers a greater sense of empowerment by allowing them to be more involved in the running of the library.



#### **4. Make the most of big data and analytics**

This report suggests that librarians are clearly under pressure to both deliver library services and to prove the value of them to budget holders; that means proving the value of the library in a quantifiable way. With the right tools in place you can make sense of the data in a meaningful way to show the value that your library is providing. Think about:

- Getting a shared understanding of what makes a library service valuable in the eyes of budget holders.
- Setting some clear, measurable objectives and understand how your technology can help you work towards them.
- Define your strategy and tactics for meeting your objectives i.e. what are you actually going to do in order to hit your objective, which might be to "increase membership by 10% in six months", for example.
- How to measure success; set up some simple metrics that you can track using the data you can access.

- Don't be afraid to experiment with new ideas – track your results and see what works best. Every library and community is different so see what works for you.
- Fail fast – by making the most out of your digital tools and tracking your data in near real time you can see very quickly what's working and what isn't. Work in an agile way and if you have a bad idea, don't worry, just move on to the next one.
- Learn from your data. Keep track of your key metrics, but most importantly understand what it is that you are doing that impacts upon them.
- Continuously improve based on everything you have learned from your data.



#### **5. Consider sustainability as delivering social value over and above its cost to society**

Show value that can be evidenced and demonstrated to budget holders within the local authority. Embrace digital and new technologies because of the inherent efficiencies that they can bring – the way cloud computing and the 'internet of things' is revolutionising every industry from heating control to the way you order a taxi. With digital technology you can track everything, so use this data to highlight areas to focus on, measure your successes and failures, and, most importantly, prove the value of your work and the work of the library in serving the community.

Don't be afraid to look at diversifying into revenue-generating services if they fit with the library's mission; income generation will help budget holders easily identify value.

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One of the key things that has bedevilled the public library sector is the lack of data on what is happening. As such, every report that surveys libraries is to be appreciated and this survey is no exception. There's some very encouraging things in the report, including the high importance that respondents place on engaging in the community, with only 2% saying that they never leave the library building. The importance of having trained librarians is seen and what a librarian should provide is fairly well agreed upon.

Perhaps as interesting is those areas with some disagreement. There's very little uniformity on what respondents think a library should offer. This is a key point. If we're unclear on that then it does not help the sector in explaining our importance to users and funders. Another point I found interesting is how many agree to a question that one suspects simply would not have been asked or considered a decade ago. Almost two-thirds agree that a librarian should ensure the library is commercially viable and sustainable. This shows that library staff are now painfully aware of the budgetary situation and cannot take their long-term future for granted.

This need for sustainability, in a world of declining budgets, is important but the survey also shows the many barriers there, including nearly half worried about the amount of time available for training volunteers. Speaking of them, although much is made of volunteers taking over libraries, it's interesting to note that they're still seen as complementary and to some extent a side-issue by the survey, showing that paid staff still dominate in 90% of cases.

In dealing with the difficulties of providing public libraries in the modern era, the library manager needs to be aware of the pros and cons of all of the options. By having a clear vision of what a library service should be, and should do, the manager can evaluate technological (open technology, RFID, etc) and non-technological (governance, volunteers etc) solutions and see what fits best. To the modern professional, ignorance of their role and of the options available is simply not viable, and it may be that it has taken the challenges of today to show that perhaps it never was.

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**Ian Anstice, Editor, [PublicLibrariesNews.com](http://PublicLibrariesNews.com) and Librarian**

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## Contact us

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Axiell Ltd  
Nottingham One,  
120 Canal Street,  
Nottingham,  
NG1 7HG

 [marketing@axiell.co.uk](mailto:marketing@axiell.co.uk)

 +44 (0) 115 9008000

 [www.axiell.co.uk](http://www.axiell.co.uk)