

Beyond Books

The role of enterprising libraries in promoting economic wellbeing



Jennifer Peachey

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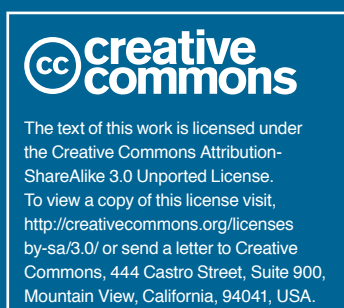
CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

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01 Introduction

Public spending cuts are changing the physical landscape, governance models and staffing of the public library service.¹ Changing demographics, varying consumer needs and new technologies as media for learning and accessing information have also provided challenges to the public library service. Some public libraries have taken these challenges as an opportunity to reconsider what they offer to members of the public and how to deliver on this offer. The Trust believes that much can be learned from these innovative and enterprising libraries.

As part of the Trust's work on the future of public libraries, we were particularly keen to understand their engagement with economic wellbeing more fully. Public libraries contribute to the economic wellbeing of individuals and communities through: supporting access to education, training and employment, enabling people to fulfil their potential, helping people maximise their income, and supporting enterprise².

The Enterprising Libraries programme involved four projects that were already exploring creative ways of encouraging enterprise and digital skills development. Independent evaluation of the projects was conducted to ensure that lessons and experience from the projects were captured and could be shared with public library professionals and policymakers.

The four case studies discussed in this report demonstrate four diverse and innovative ways in which libraries can work towards supporting and promoting economic wellbeing: hosting digital careers events; facilitating children's interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects; supporting individuals to borrow, share, lend and learn skills and develop small enterprises; and sharing knowledge about one approach to enterprise support between library authorities. They show clearly that public libraries have the potential to contribute directly to economic wellbeing in their communities and that there are many ways in which they can do this alongside the more well-established activities, such as running jobs club or helping with online benefit applications.

¹ See Carnegie UK Trust, A New Chapter Public library services in the 21st century, 2012. <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/a-new-chapter>

² To view some specific examples of public library initiatives that promote economic wellbeing see our database <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=5f19e693-849a-4581-8864-f74da6f-c97d5>



02 The Projects

Between July 2013 and March 2014, the Trust supported four projects across England and Wales.

Northamptonshire Libraries, Northampton: Enterprise Hubs and Knowledge-sharing

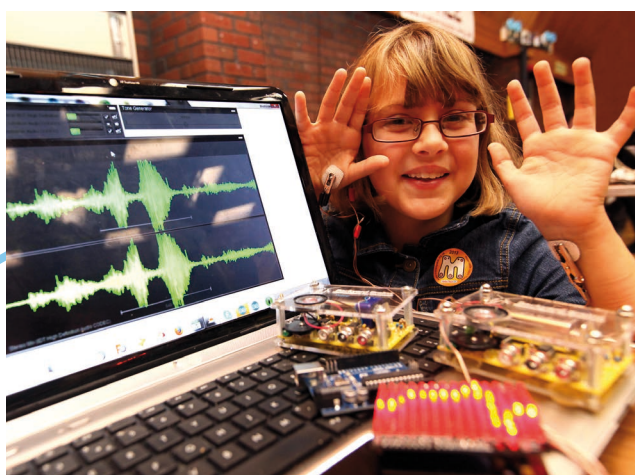
Northamptonshire Libraries support and promote economic prosperity through their Enterprise Hubs. The Hubs enable members of the public to access resources, workshops and one-to-one appointments, which help them to develop business ideas and obtain guidance on self-employment. The initiative is a collaboration between Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership and Northamptonshire Libraries. Northamptonshire Libraries have begun to test whether the Enterprise Hub model could be replicated in other library services through an exchange and secondment programme.



Neath Port Talbot Libraries, Neath Port Talbot: Technoclubs

Neath Port Talbot Libraries held Technoclubs – library-run computer-coding and robotics clubs. The aims of the clubs were to help children and young people learn about computer science in a fun way and get excited about science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. Technoclubs were held in schools and libraries during after-school hours, and were targeted at children who may not have the opportunity to engage in similar activities at school or at home.





**Gateshead Central Library,
Gateshead, Newcastle-upon-Tyne:
Digital Events**

Gateshead Central Library ran day-long drop-in activities that enabled young people to experience new technologies at first hand, learn new skills and have direct contact with digital sector employees. The digital careers events and e-Days were aimed at teens and under-30s and were held in partnership with various commercial organisations, digital hobbyist groups and a university.



Photograph: Judy Payne

**The Waiting Room, Colchester, Essex:
Library-Hack-Makerspace**

The Waiting Room in the St Botolph's district of Colchester includes a 'library-hack-maker space' – a community-led workspace where people with common interests meet to work together and exchange ideas. Though it is not itself a public library, the Waiting Room draws on the ethos of a library in that it enables people to borrow and lend knowledge and skills. It also seeks to extend the concept of a public library in terms of a space in which to share, exchange and create knowledge and skills. It sees itself as a prototype of an alternative approach to the development of a library as a community enterprise. The aims of the Waiting Room were to support economic regeneration through arts, culture, knowledge exchange and the promotion of collaborative economic models.

03 Factors that Contributed to Success

The supported projects differed in their scope, the activities they ran and the community members they targeted. Despite these differences, there were some common factors that contributed to their success. The fact that there are

commonalities across these projects suggests a scheme that embodies a number of these success factors may have a better chance at being realised compared with ones that do not.



Strong Leadership

Proactive and positive leadership is a crucial factor in ensuring the success of a project. In addition to being proactive, leaders must also inspire others through their commitment and belief in their project.

The project at Gateshead, for example, was led by a Community Learning Officer who was proactive about seeking and building connections with hobby groups, firms, schools and universities across Newcastle and Gateshead that were committed to building young people's digital knowledge and skills in order to prepare them for a tough job market. This officer also generated strong support and enthusiasm among her

colleagues. The support garnered under her strong leadership enabled Gateshead to expand its events during the period of Trust funding to include: a three-week programming course, social media surgeries, a further digital careers event, and another e-Day targeted at business start-ups and young entrepreneurs.

Clarity of purpose

A clear sense of what a project seeks to achieve helps to focus effort and create a consistent experience and message for project participants.

Neath Port Talbot Libraries, for example, had the well-defined aims of encouraging school-

age children, including primary school children, to become interested in STEM subjects and influence their curriculum choices through the use of Technoclubs, as well as enabling their library service to engage with more children. These clear and certain aims led to a successful and targeted set of activities, and served to draw like-minded people together.

Enabling culture and staff time

Planning, developing and carrying out a project can be time consuming. It is essential that staff are given time to develop initiatives in a supportive environment where developing initiatives is regarded as an essential and valuable part of what the library does. A shared ethos and value-base can also contribute to a common sense of purpose and provide impetus for staff, partners and volunteers.

The importance of staff time is clear in the case of Gateshead Library, where planning digital

events was a process that took several days over the course of two or three months. Senior management were willing to allow staff to take this time. This enabled staff to deliver a well thought through and targeted event that fulfilled a need in the local community.

Motivation and enthusiasm

In a difficult economic climate and challenging public sector environment, a passion for project activities, working with others and project goals are crucial.

The Waiting Room is a highly-innovative community-led space which would not have happened without the commitment and energy of two key players who generated the financial and practical support for refurbishment of a disused waiting room into a community space capable of attracting users and generating creative activities.



Skills and a willingness to learn

Key to a project's success are members of staff who have the requisite skills to deliver a given project. The necessary skills may not be those stereotypically associated with working in a library. It is equally essential that staff are able to identify areas for development and are keen to learn new skills.

For example, Northamptonshire Libraries developed a programme for a shadowing day to be held in Northamptonshire Libraries. They also developed staff development sessions to be conducted outside their libraries. These initiatives required staff to not only have both the capacity to develop new models of service delivery and the vision to share this with other libraries, but the skills to design and deliver briefings and workshops on the Enterprise Hub initiative and facilitate attendees' consideration of whether or not the initiative was suited to them.

“We thought: “Why pay . . . to go to [a] seminar when we can run our own one here, create the content we are all interested in, and then invite other local authorities in order to share the cost [of running it]”.”

**Jorge Solis, Principal Librarian,
Northamptonshire Libraries**

In the case of the Technoclubs at Neath Port Talbot Libraries, a very different set of skills were involved. Here, a member of staff attended a training day on Technocamps with Swansea University. Following from this experience, this member of staff identified the need to learn how to programme and went on to teach herself two child-friendly computer programmes and simple robotics. The motivation and eagerness to learn new skills were therefore crucial to the Technoclubs' success.

Willingness to use the library as a noisy and social space

An understanding of the need for libraries to sometimes facilitate noisy social activities is an important element of projects' success. Libraries need not wholly give themselves up to these activities, but being flexible about the atmosphere a library can provide allows new life to be breathed into the library building and service.

The Waiting Room provides a space for social activities. For example, people gather on a weekly basis to engage collaboratively in arts, crafts and technology events; digital entrepreneurs meet at the Waiting Room; local authorities and community groups use the space for meetings, and the Waiting Room is used as a host venue for Colchester film festival. Underpinning all the activities, however, was an ethos of finding, sharing and exchanging knowledge and information. This ethos was taken to be akin to that which underpins public libraries.



Strong partnerships and networks

Partnerships and networks make it possible to draw on skills, knowledge and resources outwith the library. The ability of libraries to build or draw on partnerships and networks was crucial to the success of the projects.

Setting up Neath Port Talbot's Technoclubs built on existing relationships between local schools and libraries. They also went on to strengthen these relationships through facilitating general skills development in the children that attended Technoclubs – such as planning, problem-solving and maths – through delivering sessions in computer programming and robotics.

“In class [the children] will remember: “We did fractions and degrees in club – I get it now!”.”

Teacher, Gnoll Primary school

“I couldn't do this [Technoclubs] without . . . NPT libraries, we just don't have the skills in the school.”

Headteacher, Gnoll Primary school

In delivering e-Days and digital careers events, Gateshead Library relied heavily upon partnerships: voluntary input from local digital hobbyists, commercial partners in the digital sector and a university running a degree course in computer games design. These partnerships were central to Gateshead's project aims and its success.

Gateshead also facilitated the creation of networks. In providing the opportunity to meet those working in the North East's growing digital gaming sector, participants were able to become part of a network and learn about what it takes to succeed in the digital sector in terms of qualifications, attitude and experience.

“This is not classical digital inclusion work where we are setting someone up with an email address . . . but broadening community access to genuinely cutting edge technology. Not only that, we are opening up contacts for the public with a growing number of local companies looking to recruit locally.”

Principal Library Manager

“I realise just how tough it is to get a job – now you have to have the networks . . . and that . . . is what Gateshead has created.”

Mother who accompanied her 12-year-old to a digital careers event.



Physical space

It is widely acknowledged that libraries offer a safe space for community activities. However, some activities will only work if there is enough space to house them. It is important to match the activity to the room available, or else take library staff and activities into another venue.

For example, both the Waiting Room and Gateshead libraries required space in which to host digital careers events and makerspaces. Gateshead Library is well provided with rooms, and the Waiting Room is a large open, unstructured space which can be reconfigured for different types of activity. Indeed, during the period of Trust-provided funding, The Waiting Room hosted over 200 events and welcomed over 6,326 visitors. It supported the development of new enterprises by providing space (and an audience and press coverage) for a kiosk in which an art gallery was hosted, a pop-up restaurant, and a café-bar.



In contrast, Neath Port Talbot made Technoclubs both manageable and successful by keeping the initiative small-scale and by leaving the library building to hold Technoclubs in schools. One Technoclub, for example, involved only six children and took place in the school rather than the library.

A little goes a long way

It is inevitable that enterprising initiatives cost money. However, the sums the Trust provided were modest – £3,000 to each project. This indicates that a little can go a long way in expanding the library offer and attracting new audiences.



For example, Neath Port Talbot Libraries used the funding to purchase three LEGO Mindstorm kits for approximately £300 each. This modest outlay was made possible by the fact that the library could use free computer programming software ('hopscotch' and 'scratch') and iPads and laptops the library already owned.

“Scratch and hopscotch actually cost nothing.” Systems, ICT and Development Officer at NPT Libraries

Self-evaluation and logic models

Self-evaluation and the use of logic models were helpful in enabling project leaders to focus on their aims, track their progress and identify areas for development.

The evaluation team helped the four projects to articulate their overall aims and intended impact, and to plot these against the kind of activities they would be running and the processes they would put in place. Team leaders also set out what measurable outcomes they were hoping for. This led to agreement on the kind of measures it would be useful for the projects to collect on an ongoing basis.

04 Challenges

The four supported projects faced a range of challenges. Between them, they demonstrate that to successfully undertake enterprising and innovative projects, library staff need to consider:

- How to persuade the public library service of the relevance of alternative approaches to the concept of a library.
- How to encourage staff to engage in new activities at a time when there is a challenge to the service as a whole, with threatened reductions in services and staffing.
- How to find a way to promote new library-based activities in a consistent way so as to build a coherent series of events, with strong branding.

These challenges could be met in different ways. One case study partner suggested that discussing alternative approaches to the concept of a library might be best achieved through face to face meetings in which the issue is framed in terms of the evolution of the library service – rather than as a shift to, or introduction of, something ‘different’.

Framing change in positive terms and as an opportunity was also seen as important in encouraging staff. Harnessing the passions, hobbies or interests of staff was also recognised as a way in which to identify and generate new activities in the library that would engage staff. One case study partner was clear that encouraging staff to engage with new ideas, activities and developments was understood to be an integral part of their role.



Lastly, freeing up staff to use social media in an engaging way was suggested as a key element of a branding and marketing strategy, and one partner shared that reaching new audiences took a considerable amount of time.

A broader issue that may face those wanting to share skills across library authorities, is whether or not there is support at UK and devolved level for promoting new models of service development in which one library authority leads service development and others are encouraged or required to replicate the service model. An approach that specifically aims to ‘scale up’ innovation could be beneficial to the sector.



05 Discussion

The success factors identified for these four projects are those required for any innovative activities in libraries. However, the existence of these success factors cannot be taken for granted in the public library context. Any public library service that aims to respond creatively to the needs of its local population and target economic wellbeing will need to create the environment within which such practice can succeed, which means addressing the success factors outlined.

For libraries to continue to make a contribution to economic wellbeing – and to do this in the ways relevant to their local communities – requires an environment in which library staff are supported to work in new ways and to know that they are valued. This depends on local authorities and central government recognising and supporting the role which libraries can play in achieving their economic goals. It could be achieved by increasing the type and range of opportunities for professional development – with a focus on skills that are relevant to the current context

in which they work. There may be potential to develop training and recognition for the kind of skills needed to create successful projects in public libraries with a focus on economic wellbeing.

The experience of the four case studies suggests a need to find ways to encourage more joint working between library authorities so that successful approaches developed in one area can be shared with staff in other library authorities.

Where funding and resourcing of public libraries are under threat, sharing resources – be that staff, robotics kits, or procurement procedures – between libraries or library authorities may prove to be a helpful way forward. Again, in our case studies, partnerships between libraries and the private sector or universities provided the basis for enterprising activities, with these partners offering their services on a voluntary basis.

The development of more shared approaches may depend on a national approach being developed, as has been done in England, Wales



David Charlton Photography – Gateshead



and Northern Ireland through the universal offers developed by the Society of Chief Librarians.

A universal offer on promoting economic wellbeing could be one way of developing shared approaches to different aspects of this work. Equally, the development of clear national strategies for the different jurisdictions in the UK may provide the context not only for getting political buy-in to libraries' work in this area, but also for establishing the most cost-effective ways of carrying out this work at local, regional, devolved or UK level. It is, however, important not to lose the capacity of local services to respond to the needs of the particular community in which it is based, as is shown by the project in Gateshead.

One of the lessons from the Waiting Room project is the capacity of the independent or voluntary sector to generate ideas and responses to economic decline. Good ideas do not all come from the statutory sector. The Waiting Room suggests an alternative future for public library

spaces, in which the more traditional public library service are complemented by creative, entrepreneurial activities driven by a desire to share, create and promote knowledge in new ways. This should come with clear economic benefits both for the community in which the library is based, and to the library itself³.

Knowledge is at its most valuable when shared. The purpose of this document is to share information about libraries' endeavours to contribute to economic wellbeing and what can be learned from these attempts. There is a role for professional organisations, national bodies in the public library sector, local government and UK and devolved government in facilitating knowledge sharing between public libraries in a more structured way. A structure to support the sharing of good practice and the creation of spaces (both online and offline) for librarians to discuss ideas or projects, or help each other overcome challenges they face in implementing their programme of work, would provide an invaluable network and database for knowledge and information.

The Trust has learned a lot about the process of engagement from the Enterprising Libraries programme. This learning has been put towards developing a broader programme of work, Carnegie Library Lab, to support the partnership work and knowledge exchange that will be increasingly vital to the success of library-based initiatives.

³ Arts Council England has agreed to support the Common Libraries initiative to undertake Phase II activities working with library staff interested in developing related services – further details of which will be made available via the project website: <http://www.commonlibraries.cc/> in due course.



06 Recommendations

To Library Services

- 1 Assess the extent to which your library service is supporting economic wellbeing in your community, the extent of its support for enterprise creation and its encouragement of creative digital activities.
- 2 Consider whether there are partnerships in your local communities which libraries could develop in order to create new types of activity in the library space which would support economic wellbeing.
- 3 Think about whether there is space or time in which your libraries could be used for social, collaborative and noisy activities targeted at fostering economic wellbeing.
- 4 Share knowledge and ideas about successful initiatives which you are already involved in among staff and between library branches and authorities.

To Professional Organisations and National Bodies in the Public Library Sector

- 1 Provide a structure to support the sharing of good practice. This could be done by organising and facilitating face-to-face events at conferences, developing online spaces for conversations, a dedicated blog, or running subscription email lists dedicated to enterprise and innovation in libraries.
- 2 Consider the need for a national strategy or national offer on promoting economic wellbeing in public libraries.
- 3 Consider the need for training for staff who work on economic wellbeing in public libraries.
- 4 Work in partnership with independent foundations, professional organisations and national bodies in the public library sector to design and deliver skills development courses for library staff, with particular attention to partnership working, collaboration, communication, innovation and networking.

To UK, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments

- 1 Ensure that national strategies and development plans for public libraries include incentives for collaborative working, knowledge sharing and learning across countries and jurisdictions.
- 2 Work in partnership with professional organisations and national bodies in the public library sector to fund skills development courses for library staff, with particular attention to partnership working, collaboration, communication, innovation and networking.

